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LUKE'S OLD PARD BENT OVER AND LIFTED THE PAW; A GREEN COVERED NOTE-BOOK WAS STICKING TO IT.

OR,

The Gold Crater's Secret.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF THE "CHINCAPIN DAN" NOVELS,
"DAINTY LANCE" NOVELS, "MUSTANG
SAM," "HURRICANE BILL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LUCKY LAD AND HIS PARD.

"TAKE a look, Poley. What do you see?"

"Waal, lad, I reckon it don't need no look fer that."

"All right, pardner. What do you see without looking, then?"

Poley Applejohn cast a quick, keen glance into the face of Luther Larrimer, then gave his

broad shoulders a shrug. Of course it could be nothing more than a whim, this asking information from one less well posted than himself; but the big fellow had long since become reconciled to blindly following the lead given by the Lad of Luck, and with another sweeping glance over the scene spread before their eyes, he made reply:

"Fu'st, thar's what critters call the Half-Way House."

"Half hidden from here by the two trees arching over its roof; just so, Napoleon! And you know who plays boss down yonder?"

"Trick McAllister."

"Otherwise Tiger Trick," nodded Light-heart Lute. "And those stray shacks scattered about the Half-Way House, Poley?"

"B'long to Tiger Trick's gang. 'S if you didn't know that!"

"None of your remarks, Mr. Applejohn. I'm after information, and always work a claim according to fancy, if not strictly by rule."

"Go on, boss," meekly rumbled the giant. "Butter's freezin' 'twixt the jaws o' me!"

"That's more like it, Mr. Applejohn! Trick McAllister runs the Half-Way House, and has a gang to back him up. In what, Poley?"

"Ef it's in doin' good, or 'spensin' charity, then I don't know it. Ef 'tain't in kerryin' out the p'izen tricks 'spired by the Old Boy him own self, then it's jest beca'se the devil knows Tiger Trick kin hatch up heap plenty mischief 'thout any o' his help!"

With those emphatic words came an expression of such hearty hate, scorn and indignation into that honest face, that Luther Larrimer had to laugh, even while nodding his full approval.

Equally as well as Napoleon Applejohn did Light-heart Lute know the evil reputation deservedly attached to the man better known in mining circles as Tiger Trick McAllister. The big fellow could tell him little new along those lines, but with all his smiling good humor and careless ease, he whose proverbial good fortune had won for himself the title of the Lucky Lad, was not to be diverted from the line once marked out, until his goal was fairly won.

For years these two men, forming a strong contrast in almost every respect, had been close friends and "side pardners," sharing good fortune and bad, sunshine and showers, success and failure, like true brothers in heart, as they were brothers-at-arms. A stroke aimed at one, was a blow at both, and four good hands flew up to ward off or give back, almost always with compound interest added.

These changes for good or evil were far more frequent than ordinarily fall to the lot of men, even where life is spent in the wildest, roughest, least civilized sections devoted to mining and prospecting for the most precious minerals. Not because the chums were fond of fighting or reckless adventures, however, but because Luther Larrimer had started out in early manhood with one settled resolve: to solve the mystery which hung over the fate of his father, Stephen Larrimer.

One of those restless spirits who are so apt to be led away by a glittering possibility in the far distance, rather than rest content with patiently plodding along in a field which returns a bare living, Stephen Larrimer had left his home, his wife and baby son, to seek his fortune in the mines.

Like so many others, he had his ups and downs, now sure that fortune lay fairly within his grasp, only to as often find it a true will-o'-the-wisp, then growing despondent and only kept from ending the uneven struggles with a bit of lead and a pinch of powder, by remorseful thoughts of his dear ones "back home."

Then—Stephen Larrimer disappeared!

Just after sending his heartsick wife word that their fortune was made, at last! Just when she was beginning to count the days which must drag so slowly by before his arms could once again close about her form, his lips press hers, as of old!

Only one among thousands, this unexpected disappearance. They began in the early 'Fifties, when so many tear-dimmed eyes were turned toward the Pacific, watching and praying for the safe home-coming of the Argonauts. Never a year, never a gold-field since but what can furnish its quota.

"Coming home!"

Yes, when the last trump sounds!

Mrs. Larrimer went to her grave, broken-hearted at last, but Luther still clung to hope, although he had spent years in the vain search for his missing father, or some clew to his actual fate. Time and again he had struck a trail which seemed to promise good results, but

as often had he failed: the clew was false, or applied to some other unfortunate.

Hardly six months before this story opens, he felt nearly certain that his life-trail was nearing its longed-for ending, but once again he found bitter disappointment in place of glad success, just as had been the case nearly two years past, when Poley Applejohn found the richest, dearest treasure earth can afford an honest, true-hearted man, in the young woman who was now his wife and the mother of his baby boy.

In William Blackwood, then known throughout the mines as "Old Crazy," or "Old Mystery," Larrimer felt sure he had found his long-lost father, but when reason was fully restored to the crazed wanderer, that hope was blasted, as so many had been before it.

Then, too, Poley Applejohn had to fall over head and ears in love with Little Chiquita, the half-blood daughter of Old Crazy. Light-heart Lute was the first to congratulate the pair, when fairly made one, but even so soon he felt that a new life was beginning for himself, even as for his partner. And so it came about that the Lad of Luck plunged into a series of adventures where the giant bore no part, and of which he was even yet only dimly aware.

For years William Blackwood had kept his bonanza secret from the world, despite the earnest efforts to coax, trick or torture the truth from his lips, but once the story got wind, people flocked to the spot and a little town sprung up as by magic in the golden valley: a town to which Poley Applejohn gave the name of Happy Valley.

It was not the honest giant's fault if this title proved a misnomer in some respects. He did all any one man could to keep out the lawless element, and was not long in becoming known as the man who would have peace even if he had to fight for it!

It was while carrying out this principle that a certain gang, under the lead of Trick McAllister, was driven out of Happy Valley, to settle down in the valley upon which we find the two chums gazing, just now.

"A bad man, and a bad gang, eh, Poley?" uttered the Lad of Luck, gazing through half-closed lids down the valley. "And if a fellow was to step on Tiger Trick's toes, more feet than hangs to his ankles would swing back for a kick?"

"Ef ye trompled onto the tail of a copperhead, wouldn't its head come to ax ye what fer?"

"Mighty apt to, pardner. And McAllister's gang would strike just as quick for him, you reckon?"

"Give 'em a chance—yes!"

"And you'd hardly call a man wise who'd deliberately give them just that chance, Poley?"

"Meanin' you, Light-heart?"

"Or any other man—yes."

"You shorely ain't sech a fool, lad?"

"Thanks, if you mean it for a compliment."

"But, be ye, lad?"

"Be I what?"

"Thinkin' o' gwine down thar, jest as ye be?"

"How ought I to go, Poley?"

"Good Lawd!" flinging out one huge paw in utter disgust. "'Tain't so much the way ye'd ought to go, as the way ye're boun' fer to come back, that's troublin' me, pardner! Why, man alive, don't ye know? Trick McAllister'd give his best eye jest fer a chainece to ketch ye whar he could hev one good squar' swing at the life o' ye!"

"Think so?"

"I know it!"

"Then Tiger Trick will only need half a pair of spectacles when old age steals upon him, for I'm going down yonder with the express purpose of winning an interview with Mr. McAllister."

That troubled light deepened in the big blue eyes of the giant, and his fingers tugged restlessly at his magnificent beard. He longed to expostulate, but past experience told him the uselessness of words, when once Light-heart Lute had fixed upon a course to follow. And that Luther Larrimer had so decided, one glance into his face made clear.

A smooth, round, almost boyish face it was, too, despite the hard, cold light that came into his gray eyes, or the stern lines that showed for a brief space about his mouth.

Although more than a year past his majority Luther Larrimer would pass as a mere lad among strangers, thanks to his beardless face, his trim, graceful figure, barely up to medium height. Yet, those who knew him best, would tell you that a more wicked fighter never drew the breath of life than this same youth, once he found fair cause for striking.

Light-heart Lute turned his gaze from the little cluster of buildings in the valley, and his old smile came back as he met that troubled

look. His hand went out, to close over the fingers of his friend, and something more than his usual earnestness came into his voice:

"You think I'm going crazy, Poley? Is that it?"

"You're talkin' mighty like it, anyway!"

"Because I speak of paying Tiger Trick a visit?"

Applejohn nodded, slowly speaking:

"You bain't fergot the part you tuck in cleanin' the riff-raff out o' Happy Valley, pardner. It tuck some rough talkin', an' ef they wasn't no wuss done, that was owin' to our hevin' the heft o' numbers on our side. Tiger Trick went, beca'se he hed to. But—you know the word he sent back, time an' time over?"

"That if you or I ever came his way, without two men against his one, we'd go back on other feet than our own?"

"That's what he said, an' tuck his black oath to, pardner," soberly nodded the giant.

"Meant it, too, no doubt," laughed Light-heart Lute, once more turning his eyes toward the little cluster of buildings in the valley beyond and below them. "Yet, Poley, I'm going down there this evening, and I'm going to ask Tiger Trick McAllister to give me a treasure worth far more than all the gold ever taken out of Happy Valley."

"You mean it, lad?"

"I mean every word of it, Poley."

"Waal, I reckon we kin git a bite or two while they're makin' a squar' meal off o' the two o' us, anyway!" with a short, grim laugh.

CHAPTER II.

OUTLINING A DESPERATE EXPLOIT.

"You don't stop to ask what it all means, Poley?"

"I don't need. We're pards. That's plenty 'nough," was the quiet response. "This evenin', you say?"

"Right after dark comes—yes."

"Then I don't reckon they's any law 'g'inst my hevin' a smcke," producing pipe and plug of tobacco.

Light-heart Lute covertly but keenly watched Applejohn, while he used his knife to chip bits from the slab of tobacco, then grinding them to atoms in one hollowed palm with the knuckles of his other hand, preparatory to loading his loved pipe.

The Lad of Luck nodded his head, a smile coming back to his lips, for that scrutiny gave him complete satisfaction.

This was the same true-hearted Poley who had stood by him in more than one desperate strait. Getting married had not altered him in that respect. Having wife and baby to care for and think of, had not made him one whit the less a true and sturdy chum. It was enough for him that his friend needed his help.

"You're one man of a thousand, Poley," said Lute, after the pipe was loaded and in full blast. "Time was when I'd take you at your word, and let you gain wisdom from experience, but that time is past. Just open those ears of yours, and I'll tell you the why and the wherefore."

"I'm listenin', ef you'd rather hev it that way, lad," nodded the giant, rolling over to an easier position. "Or I'm goin' it blind, the way I've done more times 'n I keer to count up jest now."

"You remember the colored boy I brought to Happy Valley?"

"Lem Claybank you called him: yes," nodded Applejohn.

"And you know what I told you before dragging you away from your wife and baby: that I'd been havin' a little racket up in the hills?"

Another assenting nod.

"Well, I reckon it's about time I was tellin' you a little more concernin' that affair, particularly as it gave me the excuse for paying Tiger Trick a friendly visit. Then, too, one of your old acquaintance was mixed up in the business. You haven't forgotten Showy Joe Hoover?"

"The dandy gambler, with rings in his ears, who was so sot on hangin' Old Crazy?"

"The very same rascal, Poley," nodded Larrimer. "He did his level best to down us both on that occasion, though he lied out of it in the end. And he tried to play pretty much the same trick up in the hills, this bout, but he didn't come off quite so sound, I'm happy to say."

"You salivated the dirty cuss?"

"He got his dose, yes," with a passing frown. "But let me begin at the right end, and you'll have a clearer idea of the situation, pard."

"As I told you, when I came back, I found the negro, Lemuel Claybank, up in the hills, almost starved to death, and took him under my

wing, though I expected he'd be far more bother than profit. Still, I wouldn't let him go starve, you know!

"I was heading for Happy Valley, to get shut of the boy, when we got mixed up in a mighty curious adventure. That was the discovery of an old miner, who had been shot and stabbed, then hastily buried, for dead!

"He had partly uncovered himself when we found him, and we did all we could for the poor fellow. He couldn't tell who hurt him, but he did say that the deed was almost surely done because of a belief that he had found a rich bonanza which he was working to great profit.

"He gave me this information, then begged me to see that no harm came to his little girl, his only child, then, as we both thought, he died. We put him safely in a cave, out of the rain, then looked up his cabin, meaning to do what we could for his little girl.

"Instead of finding her alone, waiting for her father to return, we found the cabin jumped by a man and woman, who claimed to be Huck Shaw and wife. But the woman—you've heard me speak of Roxy Ringgold, Poley?"

"The she-sport?"

"A thoroughbred, too, for those who have a taste that way," nodded Light-heart Lute, with a grim smile. "I dare say the world contains many a worse woman than Roxy, but I doubt if there was ever a more dangerous adversary to be found in petticoat kingdom. But that don't count, just now.

"I knew Roxy at sight, but she didn't know me, and right there's where I got the bulge on 'em, which was mightily needed, too, old man!

"When I asked after Adam Elton, which was the name given me by the poor old fellow we pulled out of the grave, Roxy gave me a fairy tale, in great shape. The old gentleman had played them for suckers, and sold them a worthless claim for a big price, then taking his girl and pulling out for the East.

"Of course I had to swallow the dose, in seeming, for there was no sign of the little girl to be seen, and I backed out as gracefully as possible. But I didn't give it up so easy. I couldn't. I'd sworn to one whom I believed was dying, that I'd look after his daughter, and now I knew Roxy Ringgold was mixed up in the affair, I had a clearer idea of the peril that daughter was running.

"It'd take too many words to give the whole story, just now, so I'll boil it down and merely bunch the main facts. They are these:

"Adam Elton had struck a mighty rich deposit, and the wolves were after it, three in number: Roxy, Huck Shaw, and Showy Joe Hoover."

"Jest his hold!" growled the giant.

"He lost his hold, this bout, though, please the pigs! They had Grace Elton imprisoned in a little cave, not far from the cabin. They tried to scare the secret of Elton's bonanza out of her, but failed. Then Showy Joe tried the old trick: pretending to be her friend in secret, meaning to run her off and coax or frighten her into marrying him, when he'd come in for the gold, of course!

"Lem backed me up in great shape, and in the end we got the best of them, helped along by a quarrel which arose between Shaw and Hoover. I came up just as they got to work. Showy Joe downed Shaw, for keeps, and was running away when he saw me. He was close to the river, which ran between high banks just there. He tried to dodge me in the dark, and tumbled over into the drink, just as I began shooting. That ended him, and—"

"Sure?" abruptly asked Applejohn. "You plugged him, then?"

"I hit him, yes. But the fall would have done his business, even if I had missed."

"But you found his karkidge, o' course?" persisted Poley.

"I didn't take the trouble to search," with a shrug of his shoulders. "I saw that he didn't come up, after the plunge, and that was enough. Why do you ask?"

"Beca'se sech critters ain't to be called dead ontel you see 'em an' feel 'em that way. Nur even then, ontel ye kin smell 'em, loud!"

"That's all right. Joe's too dead for skinning. Let me tell you the rest, or dark 'll catch us before I'm through.

"I turned Roxy loose, being a woman, and she struck out for safer quarters. We found Adam Elton living, having been in a trance, so to speak, when we thought him dead. We brought father and daughter together, and I may say that the old gentleman is nearly as well as ever at the present time."

"An' the gal?" slowly asked Poley Apple-

john, covertly but keenly watching that face. "You called her a little gal. Yit—Showy Joe wanted to marry her?"

"Elton called her his little girl, and I looked only for a child, at first. It was just his way. Grace is old enough to get married, and—married she will be, if I pull through the job I've taken up!"

"To you, lad?"

"To me, Poley. I love her fully as much as you loved Chiquita."

Silently their hands joined, and after a long, kindly gaze, each into the other's eyes, Lute resumed:

"Huck Shaw wasn't dead, though not very far from it. I did what I could to make his last minutes easy, and before the end came he repaid me a thousand-fold! For, Poley, I believe he has given me a positive clew to my poor father!"

"An' he's—still livin', pardner?"

Light-heart Lute drooped his head, slowly shaking it, negatively.

"I fear that's too much to hope for, but I'm going to cling to hope as long as I can find a single ray. But—even at the worst, Poley, it'll be some satisfaction to know just how and where father died—if he is dead!"

There came a brief silence. Applejohn was sympathetic enough, of course, but he knew how vain empty words would sound. Then, giving his head a backward toss, like one casting aside all gloomy thoughts, Luther Larrimer spoke again:

"You've heard some stray talk about a crater of gold, which many claim surely exists, but no one seems to know just where, or in which direction it lies. Well, Huck Shaw swore, almost with his latest breath, that a clew to the golden crater had been in his hands only a few months before, and was still his property.

"He had given it considerable thought, and sometimes fancied that he could give a guess as to where that crater of gold was to be found, but something had always turned up to prevent his making the search. And when Showy Joe Hoover and Roxy Ringgold—who was really married to Joe, he assured me, came to him with a proposition to down Adam Elton for his secret bonanza, Shaw gave the book containing all his clews to the gold crater, to—Tiger Trick McAllister, for safe keeping until his return to claim his property!"

"An' Trick's got that book now! And you're gwine down yen' way to git hold of that book?"

"That's what's the matter, Poley."

"An' you reckon Tiger Trick'll give it up?"

"Why not?" with a faint smile coming into his face. "Huck Shaw has given me a written order for it."

"That mought do, ef Tiger Trick don't know how much that book's wuth, an' ef ary other man was to do the axin' fer it. But you—an' him makin' his brags that the fu'st time you two met up 'ith each other thar'd be cold meat fer—"

"So much the worse for the Tiger, Poley," smiled young Larrimer.

"Ef his gang was counted out, yes," nodded the giant. "Nary one man's got no business with you, lad, but a gang—waal, that's wuss."

"With you to match the gang, Poley? Get out, man! Why, it'll just be a picnic! And McAllister will be only too glad to get shut of us so cheaply, by handing over the papers."

"Waal, say you git the papers. Then what?"

"I'll follow the clew to the very end! I don't care for the gold crater, if there is such a thing, but I've sworn by my mother's grave to never cease trying until I'm dead or I've found my father, if alive, or his grave, if dead. I'll never give over until I solve the mystery of his disappearance; if no more, I'll find his bones!"

Another brief silence, then the big fellow spoke again:

"Ef you say it like that, lad, we'll do the job, of course. An' it 'pears the fu'st step is gittin' hold o' them papers. Now comes in the how. Ef Tiger Trick cuts up rusty, an' 'fuses to, fork over, what then?"

"I'll try a little game of bluff, first, and if I can contrive to get my grip fairly fixed on McAllister, before he drops to my identity, maybe I can get all I want without snapping a cap."

"Tiger's a tough critter to skeer, lad."

"I know, but there's a knack in these little jobs, and if I can get the right send-off, I'm counting on an easy win. Still, if my little bluff fails, I'll come down to solid business."

"Which is—jest what, lad?"

"I'll cripple the Tiger, and turn him over to you, Poley. You'll carry him off, making for this point, and I'll stand off the gang until you're both safe under way!"

And Light-heart Lute was thoroughly in earnest as he spoke.

CHAPTER III.

A BOLD GAME OF BLUFF.

POLEY APPLEJOHN gave a grimace of disgust, then exploded with:

"An' I'm to be runnin' off 'long o' that p'izen critter, while you're buckin' the hull gang? Ketch me!"

"Which is just what you mustn't let 'em, old fellow," nodded the Lad of Luck. "I'd only have to tote Tiger Trick myself, in that case, and unless report lies most shamefully, I'll need both hands to stand off that gentle gang of toughs."

"Me run an' you fight? Ketch me doin' of it!" repeated the giant, his beard bristling and his eyes glowing with honest indignation.

"If I say it's got to be that way, Napoleon?"

Those eyes wavered, then fell, the big fellow looking ludicrously like a frightened schoolboy before a stern master, as he muttered:

"You won't say it—please don't, pard!"

Lute laughed softly, more like his olden self than he had been at any time since he first pointed out the Half-Way House. The old smile came back as he reached over to grip Applejohn by a hand, but there was an unusual gravity in his tones as he spoke:

"You ought to know how much this chance means to me, pard. You do know, if you only stop long enough to think. It's the best show I've ever had yet to clear up the mystery surrounding the fate of my poor father. But, to use it, I've got to have those papers Huck Shaw told about. Trick McAllister holds them. He hates me, as you say, and has sworn to even up matters if ever the chance came his way."

"Yit you stick to sayin' that you'll give him the chance lad?"

"If he's smart enough to take advantage of the opening before I can call game—yes! I'm betting he don't. And if I once get inside his guard before he drops to the truth, he's my meat!"

"Don't I know? That part's all right, an' easy 'nough, ef I've made out the meanin' o' the bundle you're ondoin', lad," persisted the big fellow, watching the rapid movements of his chum. "I'm lookin' to the afterclap, ef Trick kicks over the soup—see?"

"All in the day's work, Poley," laughed Larrimer, holding up a wig and full beard of black hair. "I'll cripple Tiger, and you'll tuck him under an arm, striking out for cover. I'll see that the gang don't come too brash, and if you've got a spare hand, you can chip in, of course. Only, don't forget; we've got to have Trick McAllister, alive and fit for talking! Got to, you understand, Poley!"

Although Napoleon Applejohn was twice as big as Larrimer, and a man who could act both promptly and boldly when cast upon his own resources, he never even thought of going against a decision made by the Lad of Luck, particularly when that cold, even, metallic tone was used. And from this moment on, he offered no further objections to the reckless plans of his young partner.

Disguised with false wig and beard, Light-heart Lute led the way into the valley, both men marking the best line of retreat in case they should be forced to fight for their prize.

"It'll hardly come to that, Poley," confidently assured Larrimer, as they paused where they could steal a look into the lighted bar of the Half-Way House. "You know what I'm called. My good luck never went back on me in a tight pinch, and I've got too mighty much at stake here for a fizzle. On top's our position, and on top we'll stay!"

"Ef we hev to tumble off, thar'll be a plenty big cushion t' catch the both o' us, anyway!" grimly muttered the giant, hand on pistol.

"Steady, for luck, pard! If Tiger Trick is in yonder, why—"

"Thar he is now!" hissed Applejohn, gripping an elbow as the words passed his bearded lips.

"I see him," came from Larrimer, almost in the same breath. "Now you understand the law, pard—I'm going in. You're to stay outside, for that mighty hulk defies all disguise, and—"

"I'll be whar I kin see, though," interposed Poley, grimly adding: "An' ef the bigness of a finger is turned to'rdst you, lad, I'm comin' all in a heap. You know what that means!"

"If I call, not before, Poley," warned Lute, pausing to grip the big fellow's hand tightly. "Don't forget that this means more than life and death to me, old fellow!"

"I know. It's bluff, ef bluff'll work. But ef

not—waal, I'm too big a hog to let you hev all the fun, pardner!"

The younger adventurer dared lose no more time in trying to win a better concession. He could see the athletic figure of Tiger Trick McAllister before his own bar, seemingly giving the keeper some instructions. Fearful lest his prize should escape him, after all, Light-heart Lute slouched his soft felt hat further over his eyes, then hastened forward, boldly crossing the threshold.

He had never before been at the Half-Way House, but he knew about what to expect, and as his eyes gave one rapid glance around, he found his expectations fairly well met.

The ground floor contained but one room, large, and devoid of any pretense at comfort or style. One-half was devoted to the bar, while strong tables and benches, all bolted securely to the floor, marked the section given over to gambling. In one corner stood a faro lay-out, but this was less often in use than might have been expected, considering the fact that Tiger Trick was a gambler, born and bred. Like the majority of his henchmen and customers, McAllister preferred short cards, and even at this early hour several of the small tables were in use by poker-players.

In all, nearly a dozen men occupied that large room, but after that one swift glance, Lute confined his attention solely to the proprietor of the Half-Way House.

"Evenin', pard!" he cried, in a husky tone, as he paused in front of McAllister, who turned swiftly at the first sound of his footfalls. "Hev a nail 'long o' me?"

"It's my fault, of course, but some part of you's grown clean out o' my memory, stranger," said Tiger Trick, slightly shifting his position as he spoke, turning his left side toward the black-bearded fellow, thus guarding his pistol-hand.

"That's all right, pardner!" laughed Larrimer, tossing a yellow coin upon the bar as he added: "My name's cash, an' ef yours hain't Bourbon straight, then you want to take in your sign! Sling out the p'izen, Johnny-behind-the-bar! Fer I'm on it bigger'n a wolf, to-night!"

It was a good imitation, but Lute was using his eyes as well as his tongue, and he saw that Tiger Trick was growing more suspicious than ever, although he knew his disguise had not yet been fully penetrated. Still, delay might prove fatal to his hopes, and as he gave a clumsy cavort, he managed to lock McAllister's right arm with his left, at the same time pressing the muzzle of a big-caliber derringer firmly against the desperado's side, thus leaving his own right hand free to deal with the gang in case of need.

"Give a sign, and I put a tunnel clean through you!" he whispered, fiercely, through his beard. "Play to the tune I set, and you're all right. I've backing at the door, and you're covered from top to toe!"

"What do you want of me?" muttered the desperado, standing without sign or motion, his fiercely glittering eyes fixed upon that masked face. "If my men drop to your little game— I knew it!"

Whether he made some covert signal, or whether their suspicions had been awakened by those movements alone, certain it was that the men playing cards were starting to their feet and beginning to handle their weapons in an ugly manner.

"Hold 'em back, or you die in your tracks!" grated Larrimer, his free hand gripping a ready revolver.

"What's wrong, boss? Shall we mount the durn' critter?"

"Choke 'em back I say!"

"Steady, boys!" called out their leader, but his voice was almost drowned by a shrill cry from the barkeeper, who caught sight of the weapon pressed above the head of his employer.

"It's a sheriff, boys! He's got the boss foul!"

An ugly roar burst from the gang, but louder, fiercer still came a mighty roar from the lungs of Poley Applejohn, who stood at the threshold, covering the startled gang with a brace of revolvers.

"Stiddy, you!" he rumbled, sternly. "I'll drap all who lifts a finger to mix in this pie! Stiddy! When I burn powder, I shoot to kill!"

"The big devil!" hoarsely muttered McAllister, as his men, taken so completely by surprise, stood irresolute. "Then you are—"

"Light-heart-Lute, the Lad of Luck!" cried Larrimer, sharply. "I've come to pay you that visit, Tiger Trick, but if the cold meat follows, you'll be to blame."

"What do you want of me?"

"Bid your men stand back, first. Do it, I say!" with cold ferocity. "It's to save your

own life, first of all! Bid them stand back, and idle!"

It was a terribly bitter pill to swallow, but Tiger Trick knew that to disobey meant death, and he loved life too well to relinquish his last chance too easily.

"Stand back, boys," he said, hoarsely. "Time enough to act when I give the word. Now—what is it, Larrimer!"

"Business, from the word go, McAllister! I want a little talk with you, and—"

"Spit it out, then. Talk about what?"

"Don't you try to rush the procession, Trick," laughed Larrimer, though thoroughly on guard the while. "Too many keen ears and curious eyes in here. You must step outside, where—"

"Must?" echoed the desperado, with the ghost of a sneer on face and in voice.

"If you care for life, must it is!" came the response. "I know your gang can down me if they try it on, but you'll be past crowing over their victory. I'll drill you, first of all!"

"Stiddy, critters!" rumbled Applejohn. "Fetch him, pardner."

"It's an arrest, then? What for?"

"It's not an arrest. I have a message for you. I swear to let you come back, safe and sound as you are this minute; if you play as white on your side. Now—come!"

Tiger Trick knew the alternative, for one far less keen than he could not mistake what those glittering eyes said. To refuse meant certain death. To comply might mean both escape and revenge.

"I'll take your word, Larrimer. Lead the way, please."

"Arm in arm looks more sociable, Trick," smiled Lute, then adding, for the benefit of the gang in general: "You understand, lads: McAllister is going with us, of his own accord. We don't care for followers, and the first man who dares cross that doorstep before your boss comes back, is good as a dead man."

"The fu'st an' the last, with every dug-gun critter atwixt the two, ye want to mind!" supplemented the giant, across his leveled pistols.

"Add your mite, McAllister," whispered Larrimer, pressing that hard muzzle closer to the breast of his enforced companion. "It makes all the difference between life and death—for you."

"Don't try to chip in, men, unless you hear me call, or catch a shot," growled the desperado, with difficulty smothering his vicious rage at being forced into such a humiliating position.

"If I don't come back, you'll know who to look up: Poley Applejohn and Lute Larrimer."

"An' Poley'll be right out hyar, in short pistol-range, ye want to hold fast into the mem'ry of ye all," nodded the giant, as he permitted the strangely-linked couple to pass him by, vanishing from sight of all inside the building. "Let the critter most hungry fer a blue pill come out fu'st. So-long, critters! Call, ef ye want me fer anythin'!"

He stepped backward, passing from their sight, then hastening along to overtake his chum and their prize. Even yet he hardly dared hope for success, without a fight; and his weapons were held ready to foil any crooked movement on the part of Tiger Trick.

But McAllister made no attempt to give trouble or escape. Knowing that his own death must certainly follow, he preferred to wait until these bold adventurers saw fit to fully expose their hands.

"I've come after the papers Huck Shaw left in your care, McAllister," said Lute, after a brisk walk.

"I'm sorry, but you're too late, old fellow!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CASE GROWS COMPLICATED.

"WHAT do you mean by too late?"

"Just what too late always means," was the prompt response. "That you have called too late; that another fellow's pulled the plum ahead of your coming, Larrimer!"

"Business comes fu'st, both o' ye!" warned the giant, lightly closing his left hand upon the neck of the desperado from behind, at the same time touching his skull with the muzzle of a revolver. "Draw his teeth, pardner, afore ye talk. It's heap sight the safer, I reckon!"

"You agreed to—"

"Turn you loose, safe and sound, provided you played white," interrupted Light-heart, at the same time disarming their prisoner. "So we will, and as the surest safeguard against your yielding to temptation, out come your teeth!"

"Two against one, yet you—all right!" with a reckless laugh, his tense muscles relaxing.

"Twill make the odds a little more even, I reckon. Don't overlook the penknife in my left-hand pocket, I beg of you, gentlemen!"

But, neither of his present captors were men to be disturbed by chaff or ridicule. They knew his nature, and having an important end to gain, they took the surest method of "getting there" without serious trouble.

Poley Applejohn held Tiger Trick motionless, while Lute deprived him of all weapons, securing them on his own person for the present, then saying:

"You shall have them all back at the right moment, McAllister. It's more for your own safety than ours that we're taking so much trouble."

"You're almost too kind to live, gents!" mockingly.

"Button up, critter!" growled the giant, shifting his grip from neck to arm, then forcing the desperado onward in the direction of the now distant hills. "Save your wind ag'inst the time we want ye to chin."

"Better let me talk while I'm in the humor. There's a spice of the mule in my composition, you want to understand, and when I'm told to go, I most generally feel like don't-have-to!"

Light-heart Lute had been looking back in the direction of the Half-Way House, bending his head in listening. There were no suspicious sounds to be heard, and nothing to be seen that indicated pursuit in the face of those repeated warnings. And satisfied on that point, he turned again to his captive, speaking curtly:

"It'll only be a few rods further for you to walk back, McAllister, so we'll make the hills before talking further. You've begun all right enough: keep up the same lick, and you'll soon be back home, helping your gang laugh over this little adventure."

"I'd sell out the prospect mighty cheap, if I could find any one fool enough to make a bid," laughed the fellow, harshly. "I wouldn't care so much if only we three knew of it, though that would be bad enough. But—to be roped in before the whole gang!"

"You're boss. Show yer teeth to 'em, Tiger."

"And flesh 'em, too!" grimly snapped the tough.

Nothing more was said until the trio gained the spot where the two chums had lain in hiding, watching the enemy's camp and waiting for the cover of darkness under which to make their approach.

From here they could readily locate the little settlement by the dim glow of lights. The valley lay under the light of the rising moon, but the keenest scrutiny failed to discover any moving figures, and no sounds of excitement came floating across the valley.

"Now, McAllister," said Lute, turning to his prisoner and speaking quietly: "I'll repeat what I said down yonder: I've come after the papers, or, rather, the little green-covered notebook which Huck Shaw left in your charge some three or four months ago."

"Where is Huck Shaw?" asked the Tiger.

"That don't count. If you doubt my authority, I'll strike a light and show you his signature to an order for the book. Shall I?"

"Well, I'm not insisting. Of course you wouldn't lie about it. And the belief in your probity led me to ask the question: where is Huck Shaw?"

"I fail to see the connection."

"Well, I'll explain. Huck and I have had more than one argument in our time, over the existence or non-existence of a literal hell. I held there was such a place, but Shaw held differently. Now—he's found out all about it, and I'd like to hear your opinion."

"Then you think he's dead?"

"Why not say know it?"

"Who told you so much?"

"Well, my common sense, for one thing. I know what a foolish value Huck placed on that little book, with its wild ravings about a crater of gold, and such fool' truck. I know that he'd never part with it for good, unless dead. So— you see?"

"Then you haven't seen—never mind," and Larrimer choked back the name which was almost upon his lips. "We set out to talk about the book Huck Shaw left in your care. I'm here to claim that property. To gain it, I was willing to run the risk of bearding the lion in his den, so to speak. By that you can guess how set I am on securing the property. So—where is it, McAllister?"

"Wish I knew, but I don't."

"What do you mean by that? Don't play with fire! I'm not anxious to put out your light, but if I have to, I can do even that!"

"I'm giving you straight goods, Larrimer. I

don't know where the book is now, but I can tell you where I saw it last."

"Where?"

"In the hands of a fellow named Miguel Passadena, or Arizona Mike, as the boys call him, for short."

"I've see'd the critter," asserted the giant. "He was at Happy Valley somethin' like ten months sence. Thar was a gal with him."

"His daughter, Zelda," explained Tiger Trick. "I reckon she's with him now, for the old rascal, tough as he is, cherishes her like the apple of his eye. And she's a regular jo-dandy for looks, too!"

"Never mind the girl. How did he get hold of that book?"

"Well, I'll treat you just as white as you're treating me, Larrimer. I lost it to Mike one night at poker."

"Yet Huck Shaw valued it so highly? And he left it in your care, an object of trust? Was that white, McAllister?"

"Wait a bit, pardner! Don't kick a poor fellow too mighty hard. I knew Huck Shaw valued the book highly, but I also knew that all his dreams of a real crater of gold were just as wild and visionary as those of the poor crack-brain who first put them upon paper."

"Who was that?"

"Cranky Jordan. Didn't Shaw tell you that?"

"Yes, but I wanted to see how near the truth you were sailing."

"Why should I lie about it? I've got the worst of this deal, but one game don't break a wise player. My turn may come, one day. Then, too, I'm getting over my mad fit. If I could have done you dirt at the send-off, I'd never stopped to think twice. As it is, I'm working for my liberty. See?"

"If you deserve it, you shall have it, be sure. You say you lost this book to Arizona Mike at poker?"

"Yes. I wonder that Huck Shaw didn't tell you about the fellow, for Passadena has been even more crazy over the crater of gold than Huck, which was needless! I know he offered Shaw a moderate fortune for the book, before Huck struck off up-country, a few months ago. I told Huck it was a case of two monstrous fools meeting, but he wouldn't have it that way. Then—well, I was playing in terrible hard luck, that night, and when Mike came at me with a big bet against the worthless book, I just swallowed my scruples, and let her went!"

"Passadena won, then?"

"Right off the reel! I'd tried skill and science, both, but they were no good. Mike both outheld and out-cheated me, I reckon. Anyway, I trusted it all to pure luck, and we had a hand dealt us at stud poker. I held aces to his kings in the four cards faced, and reckoned all that was left was crowing for luck. If Mike didn't face another king in his down card, while I caught a measly trey, hope may die!"

Larrimer remained silent for a few moments, after this. He was both watching and listening keenly, and he knew that Trick McAllister was speaking the plain truth, just now, at least. No man could counterfeit such supreme disgust.

"Arizona Mike placed a high value on the book, then?"

"Or its contents: he just did. Why, don't you know, the fool was in sober earnest when he promised me a mule-load of gold, when he found his crater! He did, for a fact!"

"Then you reckon he's gone to hunt for it?"

"I don't think; I just know it! He hired a little gang of tough nuts on a certainty—regular wages, you know, whether they found anything or not, so certain was he of striking it rich!"

"Of course you looked into the book, more than once?"

"Not a look! I'd heard entirely too much about it for that. I knew Cranky Jordan before he petered out, and he could talk of nothing else but the crater of gold, out of which the thousands of grizzlies drove him and ate up his partner who—"

"Did you ever hear of that partner's name?" slowly asked Lute.

"If I did, it's slipped the mind of me. Why? Was he anything to you?" asked the desperado, his curiosity glittering in his eyes.

"I brought you here to answer, not to ask questions. Have you any idea which way Passadena went in search of the golden crater?"

"Only that his general course was to the northwest."

"Then the crater must lie in that direction?"

"I wouldn't swear to that," with a short laugh. "Arizona Mike is nobody's fool. He said his course lay up yonder, but he may have

flung that out as a blind, in case any of us took a notion to follow him."

"In case you wished to find him, what course would you follow, then?"

"Well, I'd make sure by striking his trail. He showed his faith in the gold crater by taking along a train of pack-mules, besides horses for his entire outfit. That ought to make a trail to last for months in this dry weather. If you want to track him up, why—"

"You'd give me directions which your own gang could follow up even more readily, with you at their head, Tiger. Is that it?" laughed the Lad of Luck.

"Why should I go to all that trouble? I never took any stock in those fool' yarns, and I'd hardly begin at this late hour."

"How about playing even with us for this little trick?"

"I'll match it, sooner or later, of course," with a grim laugh. "But if you're fool enough to chase such a crazy ghost as that crater, I'll wait until you come back: if you are so lucky!"

"Don't ye reckon it's pritty nigh time fer to git down to business, lad?" rumbled Poley, chipping in for the first time. "You've fetched out only a pack o' lies. Give me leave to try ef I can't do better. He jest needs a bit o' prickin' up, like this!" making a vicious movement with his bared blade before McAllister's eyes.

"Easy, Poley," sternly cried Larrimer. "He's told the truth, so far. I know so much. I've been watching him too closely for a lie to pass."

"I'll kiss the book, if you've got a Bible handy, Larrimer!" said Tiger Trick, with a low chuckle.

Light-heart Lute flung the cartridges out of the pistols, then handed McAllister his weapons, saying:

"You know the road home, Trick. Good-night to you, old fellow!"

"You really mean to let me go? It isn't a sell?" doubtfully asked the desperado, but eagerly grasping his weapons, all the same.

"Didn't I tell you I would, if you played white?"

"Yes, but—" backing away until out of reach, then adding as he ran rapidly off through the night: "Guard ye, Larrimer! Showy Joe and Roxy are both living, and they swear vengeance on your head!"

CHAPTER V.

TRICK MAKES A CALL.

"HOLD up, Tiger!" called out the Lad of Luck, making one swift leap in the direction taken by the fleeing desperado, then pausing in the clear moonlight. "Only a coward runs when he's in no danger!"

"I'll run him down in a brace o'—"

"Steady, pard!" and Larrimer caught the giant by an arm as he would have started in hot pursuit. "He's loading up, and could drop you from cover like a mice! Let him go. I don't believe—"

"Steady, on your side, Lucky!" came back a cry from the desperado, who had leaped from bright moonlight into cover at his first opportunity. "I've got lead enough to sink a dozen craft of your size, if you're crazy enough to follow in my wake!"

"Leave him to me, Poley," muttered Larrimer, as the big fellow gave an angry quiver at those fiercely mocking words, then calling aloud in response: "That's all right, McAllister. I knew what I was doing when I gave back your property. You're too badly scared to hit a flock of barns at ten feet."

"Step a foot and a half to the right, if you want to test my nerves or eyesight, Lute Larrimer!"

"Call halt when I'm fixed to suit your taste, McAllister," coolly spoke the Lad of Luck, moving to the right, as directed, then facing the unseen desperado, arms lightly folded across his chest.

Poley Applejohn gave a muffled roar of angry consternation at this seemingly suicidal move. Taken by surprise he could not prevent its being made, but the next instant he leaped forth from cover, placing his gigantic figure before his beloved chum.

"Chaw my meat fu'st, dug-gun ye, Tiger!"

"Well, you're a dandy, big fellow!" cried McAllister, promptly stepping forth from cover, a reloaded pistol gripped in his right hand as he faced the chums.

Applejohn apparently had no ear for flattery, for his armed hand was flying to a level for a snap-shot, when Larrimer gripped his wrist and turned the weapon aside, at the same time calling out:

"Flag of truce, Tiger! Why can't we finish our little talk?"

"Flag of truce goes, since you ask it," laughed the desperado, boldly coming back, though still keeping his pistol in readiness for use. "I didn't run because I was afraid, you mind, gents; just hoping you'd chase me, in fact. If you had—well, I've burnt powder by moonlight before this!"

"You'd have dropped us, then?"

"Bet I would! And yet—I'm not so mighty sure, Larrimer," his tone changing perceptibly. "If I had dropped you, I'd have felt sorry over it when I came to think—honest!"

"Which means—just what, McAllister?" smiled the Lad of Luck.

"That I like your grit, after all!" was the impulsive reply, as the desperado came still nearer, seemingly forgetting possible peril in his sudden conversion. "I couldn't tell you so much, as long as you held me up. If I'd tried, you both would have thought me playing the baby act. But now, with a loaded gun in my grip, I'm good as the best, let it be for talk or for fighting. And so I say—I like your grit, Lute Larrimer! You're heap sight too good a boy to be let go under in the dark. And that's why I gave you the hint, a bit ago."

"About Showy Joe Hoover and his wife?" slowly asked Larrimer.

"Yes. I more'n half expected the big fellow to down me with a snap-shot, after all, and that's why I shot the word back so quick. Maybe you won't believe it, but I wanted your eyes open, even if mine were to be closed."

Despite that harsh, half-defiant, half-apologetic tone, Light-heart Lute felt that the desperado was speaking the truth. It was hard for him to do so gracefully, but he really wished to do his recent captor a favor!

"And you really meant me to believe that, McAllister? Roxy's all right, so far's I know, but I saw Showy Joe Hoover cash in his chips!"

"You saw him tumble into the drink, then?"

"You know that much? Then you must have seen Roxy, sure!"

"I've seen them both: Showy Joe as well as his woman. I tell you, Larrimer, they're both living, and they've both got it in for you, big! They're wild for hair, and swear they'll down you for keeps, if it takes a lifetime. They'll do it, too, unless you're smart enough to get in the first blow."

"Where are they, now?"

Tiger Trick gave a short laugh, shrugging his shoulders as he drew back a pace, even so soon seeming to regret his impulsive warning.

"Steady, my boy! That's beyond the limit. I can't sell a pal, you ought to know!"

"Are they down yonder?" persisted Lute, nodding toward the distant lights in the valley.

"You can tell by searching. The way's open, follow it if you reckon the game's worth the candle," crisply uttered Tiger Trick, turning about and moving away from the two men.

Poley Applejohn looked into the face of his chum, but Light-heart Lute silently shook his head.

Tiger Trick never turned his head, but walked down the slope with as much seeming coolness as though parting from sworn friends instead of open enemies. His face was just a trifle paler than ordinary, and a disagreeable chill was crawling up and down his back the while.

"He won't do it, but the big fellow may!" kept passing through his brain. "The moon's bright enough to make shooting sure. Larrimer isn't that sort of man, but—is that big devil taking aim? Curse ye, man! shoot if you're goin' to!"

It was a test of nerve such as few men have ever been called on to endure, but Tiger Trick proved fully equal to the occasion, in outward seeming, at least. He never glanced back, never quickened his steps, never attempted to take advantage of what cover offered itself. If death must be the penalty, he would not show those men even a glimpse of the white feather.

"They made me knuckle before the gang, but they can't do it out here, where they're two to one. 'Twas the surprise did the trick. Ye lie if ye say I was frightened! Shoot if you think that way! Shoot, and get it over with, ye devils!"

Even when he had passed beyond sure pistol range of the spot where he had last seen his captors, Trick McAllister could not believe he was to go scot-free. He felt almost positive that Poley Applejohn was stealthily following him, pistol in hand, playing with him much as a cat will toy with a helpless mouse.

Surely they wouldn't be foolish enough to let him go free, after the bitter oaths he had sworn, after adding this last ugly debt to the black

score he had already marked down against them?

"If they do—curse ye!" he snarled, wheeling, with half-raised pistols. "Down me now, or I'll—show up, ye big cur!"

All was silent. He could detect no signs of pursuit. And at length Tiger Trick was forced to believe that the two chums had acted in good faith; had permitted him to go free, just as they had promised while taking him from the very midst of his armed gang of toughs.

"More fools you!" he exclaimed, when satisfied that no one was on his track. "Better if you'd downed me while the chance was yours! Now—I'll even up! I've got to—got to, you hear? If I don't, the boys—I'll have to plant more than one of them, as it is! I can hear 'em whispering and chuckling, from clear here!"

Only in imagination, but that was too much for a man so proud of his record as Tiger Trick. He had been "a chief" too many years to lightly relinquish the title. Whoever deprived him of it must be able to show cause.

Even the thought was a bitter pill to swallow and Tiger Trick was rapidly repenting the manhood he had shown, of late. Why hadn't he dropped them both, when the chance was his? He could have done it under cover of that talk about Showy Joe Hoover and Roxy Ringgold. And if he could tell his gang where two dead men lay, samples of how he "got even," he would loom up bigger than ever in their eyes!

"I could, but I didn't! Why? That don't matter, ye curs!" snapping his strong teeth together viciously, as he increased his pace and drew nearer Half-Way House. "Who's boss here, anyway?"

Resolved to settle that point, once for all, Tiger Trick strode through the open door, hand on pistol as he flashed a keen glance about over the startled ruffians inside. He knew that they had just been talking about him, if only from that sudden silence.

The rough fellows quickly rallied, first one then another venturing a jest or covert sneer, gaining courage with the silence maintained by their chief.

"Ob, button up, all o' ye!" exploded one big rascal, giving a facetious wink with the eye furthest from McAllister. "You don't know the differ 'twixt skeer an' sarcumvention! The boss was jest workin' to s'round the critters. He's got 'em piled up, out vender, ready for our 'spection. Hain't I right, Tiger?"

"Waal, I hain't sayin' ye lie, pardner," grinned another, "but from whar I stood, the boss looked jest the way I feel when I'm too mighty bad skeered to say my soul's my own prop'ty!"

"That's enough, gentlemen!" coldly interposed McAllister, his glittering eyes passing swiftly from face to face. "You've had time enough to parade your rusty jokes while I was absent. I went because I had to. I've come back, because they promised I should. Now—one more word, to each and every one of you:

"There isn't a man of you all but would have acted just as I did, under like circumstances. Luther Larrimer is a better man than any one present, including myself. If you doubt it, go fetch the Lad of Luck into camp!"

"Ef you couldn't make the rifle, boss, why—"

"I could have killed them both. Why I didn't do it, is for me to know and you to find out. I say I could have killed them both; and I will add just this much more: I can and will kill the first knave among you to crack another joke on this affair. You ought to know whether I'm a man to make my word good or not. Think it over between you, and if jokes must come, pick out the man who'll look best at the head of a funeral procession, and I'll fit him for the position!"

Without pausing for a reply, Tiger Trick turned about and left the saloon, walking rapidly away through the blending moonlight and shadows, apparently making for the hills, though in a different direction from that in which he had so recently been led, a captive.

His present journey, however, was a much shorter one than that, for he came to a halt in front of a small shanty of rough boards, through an occasional chink in which came a dim gleam of light. The door was closed, the one visible window was closed by a rude shutter, but Tiger Trick rapped sharply, like one who felt assured that the inmates had not yet retired for the night.

There was a brief delay, then a woman's voice called out:

"Who's there?"

"A friend, of course, Roxy. Open the door."

There came a subdued clinking, rattling sound as of a heavy chain, then the barrier was partly opened. The head and shoulders of a woman

showed through the opening, but with the light behind her, naught could be distinguished of her features.

"What's up, Mac?" she asked, her voice betraying uneasiness, her head moving as though her eyes were suspiciously sweeping the ground around and beyond.

"How's Joe feeling, Roxy?"

"Better. Why do you ask, in that tone?"

"Glad to hear he's better, for he needs to be, now if ever!"

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Well, a man like Showy Joe wants to be in hearty condition to receive a certain class of callers, Roxy."

"Once more, what do you mean, Tiger Trick?"

"That Poley Applejohn and Light-heart Lute have been here, asking about you and Showy Joe Hoover—no less!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TIGER'S GUESTS.

THE woman shrunk back with a low ejaculation of fierce excitement, but the sound was drowned by a sharp cry from within the small building; the voice of a man, but a man in abject terror.

"Don't let 'em—Roxy!"

"I'll not—it's only McAllister, Joey, and he's our best friend, you know," soothingly called out the woman, over a shoulder.

Then she turned again to Tiger Trick, hurriedly whispering:

"You don't—you can't mean that—I'll have your heart's blood if you even think of giving up my man!"

"And welcome to it, Roxy. I never yet sold a pal, and I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. Still, it's gospel; they were asking about Joe."

"Here, of you?"

The Tiger nodded, the light revealing a grim smile on his strongly marked visage.

"Then you've sworn to kill them both if ever the chance offered itself! You did? You didn't let them go scot free, Tiger?"

"You don't happen to have a chair handy, Roxy?" drawled the desperado, leaning against the side of the door. "A stool will do, for that matter. It's a long story, and my knees feel rather weaker than usual, I'm sorry to say."

"Come in, McAllister," said the woman, drawing back a pace. "You're master, here. We're only your guests. Come in, man!"

"Then you're not above taking a hint, Roxy?" with a low laugh.

"Look over it, please. I could think only of Joe, and—It's only Mr. McAllister, Joey," turning swiftly as another half-frightened cry came from beyond.

"And you want to handle that gun a little less carelessly, o'd fellow," nodded Tiger Trick, as he crossed the threshold, closing the heavy door behind himself.

The shanty contained only one room, but a portion of this, containing a bed, had been curtained off with a calico sheet. A tall, slender, pale-faced man was holding this curtain back with one hand, his unsteady frame supported by the head of the bed. His right hand gripped a revolver, whose wavering muzzle was trying to command the door.

"I thought—I heard you say—that devil isn't here, after me, McAllister?" quavered the man, shivering with a strange terror.

"He isn't here, Joey," soothingly murmured Roxy, one arm stealing about his waist as her other hand disarmed him. "And if he was, we'd never let him do you further harm. Don't you know that, Joey?"

It was a curious scene, and Tiger Trick smiled as he watched, his thin lips curling with the half-pitying scorn which bold, strong men are apt to feel for one who lacks those essential qualities of manhood.

Showy Joe Hoover, gambler, confidence-man, all-round sport, still wore the jeweled hoops of gold in his ears, still bore much of the flashy yet costly jewelry which had gone far toward giving him that prefix; but in all else he seemed little more than the shadow of his old self.

His spirit seemed broken, his nerve shattered, his brute courage gone. His eyes were sunken, his face pale and thin. He looked like one who has been very near the grave, and there was a bandage wound around his temples, as though to cover a still unhealed wound.

As though warned by her jealous spirit, Roxy Ringgold—for she still retained that name, though the legally wedded wife of Joseph Hoover—turned a flashing gaze upon Tiger Trick, surprising that pitying sneer upon his strong face.

"You're thinking a lie, McAllister, and no man knows that better than yourself!" she said,

sternly, a proud glow lighting up her almost beautiful face. "Joe was startled from sleep. He's still weak from his wound, to say nothing of what else he had to bear. Then—"

"You've been pretty careful not to let on just what else he had to bear, Roxy," interposed Tiger Trick, with a short laugh. "Only for what Light-heart Lute let drop, unawares, I'd still be in the dark. Yet you call me your friend."

Roxy Ringgold gazed steadily into his eyes, her own glittering. Her tall, robust, yet shapely figure seemed to swell, even as her hand stole back to press that of the gambler, who was half-reclining on the bed.

That proud, defiant face came just short of being beautiful. It was a little too large, too strong, too masculine for beauty. With her big black eyes, her heavy growth of jetty hair, her full, red lips, her square, cleft chin, Roxy Ringgold was one to inspire animal love, rather than a purer, holier sentiment.

"I called you friend because I believed you were our friend, Trick McAllister. But now—you knew Luther Larrimer was our bitterest enemy, yet you let him come and—He has gone, then?"

"Well, if he hasn't gone, Roxy, 'tisin't because I hindered him," the desperado chuckled, covertly enjoying the terror still marking that pale face back of the woman's shoulder.

"If I had only been in your place!" panted Roxy, hardly. "If I only had! He might have gone, but it would have been—in that direction!" with a swift motion downward.

"What brought him here?" asked Showy Joe, plucking up his courage a bit, now that he realized his hated and feared enemy had left that vicinity. "How did he find out I was still living?"

"Did he think you dead, then?"

Roxy Ringgold gave Showy Joe a gentle nudge, then took up the broken thread.

"If we haven't told you all, McAllister, it's simply because you didn't care to ask for information. Of course we knew we could trust you implicitly, even if you have let a chance like this slip you. And then, too, we reckoned you could guess near enough to the truth, since we came back without Huck Shaw. Of course you knew what sort of game he intended playing?"

"Not a bit of it, Roxy! Huck Shaw knew how to keep his mouth shut, on occasion, though his clapper rung out freely enough when there wasn't anything in particular to hide. You said he had gone under, didn't you?"

"After spoiling the whole game, and nearly murdering Joe into the bargain—yes!" with a vicious click of her white teeth. "Joe downed him, though! And he would have downed the Lucky Lad, too, only for his foot slipping in the dark, and the river being so near! That's the mark of Larrimer's lead on his head, now. The bullet struck him in front, you mind, Trick McAllister! Would that be the case if Joe was the cur your eyes called him, a bit ago?"

"You read their meaning wrongly, Roxy," nodded Trick, mildly. "I'll never even hint at cowardice in a man who fairly faces Light-heart Lute when his mad is up; never after this night, Roxy!"

"What happened? Tell us all, man!" with an impatient frown. "Can't you see how anxious we are to have you explain your words of a bit ago? How came he here? How came you to let him go away alive?"

"Budget for budget, Roxy," nodded McAllister. "What sort of game were you trying to work with Huck Shaw, and how came Larrimer mixed up in it? If he downed Joe, why didn't he make a clean job of it?"

As the quickest method of getting at the whole truth, Roxy Ringgold briefly but clearly detailed the Elton episode, then explaining how, after being dismissed by the Lucky Lad with arms and food to last her until she could reach the settlements, she chanced to discover Joe Hoover, lying like one dead on a little island in the river, several miles below the point where he had fallen into the stream.

She swam across to the island, found Joe alive, though unconscious, then restored his senses and managed to bear him to the further shore. After lying in hiding for a couple of days, he was strong enough to slowly journey along, to find shelter with Tiger Trick McAllister.

In return, Tiger Trick told how he had been taken off his guard by the two bold adventurers, that evening. He concealed nothing, seemingly finding a certain grim pleasure in emphasizing the desperate nerve displayed by their mutual enemy in the face of such long odds. But before narrating the object for which all this risk was run, he said:

"You didn't try to hear what Huck Shaw told Larrimer, before he croaked, Roxy? I thought not, or you'd hardly have felt so easy, all these days!"

He told about the book in which was recorded the facts—or crazy fancies—concerning the crater of gold, smiling grimly as he heard them viciously cursing Shaw for cheating them out of such a glorious prize by his secrecy. And even Showy Joe seemed to forget his fears in baffled avarice as Tiger Trick continued his story.

"And you not only gave up that book, but you let Larrimer slip out of your grip!" panted Roxy Ringgold, her hands tightly clinched.

McAllister laughed, sneeringly.

"All cracked, every one of you! First comes Cranky Jordan; he was crazy over the crater of gold! Then Huck Shaw was after it. Arizona Mike is seeking for the gold crater, Light-heart Lute is hunting for him; then—what's to hinder you two going after the whole boodle?"

"Will you help us?" eagerly asked Showy Joe, leaning forward.

"As an equal partner, of course," amended Roxy Ringgold.

"Not against the lad of Luck," was the positive response. "But as for you two—of course I don't want to hurry you off before you're good and ready, but I'm pretty sure Light-heart Lute knows you are hiding in this quarter, and if he should take a notion to come after you, to finish up the work he began up your way—well, he's just the sort of a critter to make the rifle!"

Showy Joe shrunk back, and even Roxy Ringgold turned paler before saying:

"You'd give us up to that devil, McAllister?"

"No, but he'd just naturally take you, in spite of my teeth! That's the sort of a hairpin he is! I hardly need tell you that!"

Tiger Trick arose and turned to the door. Showy Joe seemed about to call out, but a strong palm closed over his lips and checked the utterance.

Roxy Ringgold gave no sign as McAllister waved an adieu, and only after he had passed from sight, did she leave the bedside. Then she hastily barred the door, coming back to her husband, her eyes glittering vividly.

"It's you and I for it, Josey! The Tiger has gone clean back on us, or all signs lie!"

"You think—that devil isn't out yonder, waiting for me to show up?" whispered the gambler, but with a show of his old-time nerve.

"You don't mean that, Roxy?"

"No," her black brows meeting in a dark frown. "I don't reckon McAllister is quite that bad. He wouldn't sell a friend to buy immunity for himself. He used to hate both of those devils, almost as savagely as you and I hate them. But—"

"If we could not only get even with them, but win that treasure, Roxy!" panted the gambler, his eyes all aglow, avarice overmastering fear. "If we only could! And—isn't it worth trying, Roxy?"

"Wait—let me think," muttered the woman, sinking into the chair, bowing her body, chin supported by her joined palms while her elbows rested on her knees.

She stared blankly into the fireplace, where a few coals were still glowing. She seemed lost to all sights, all sounds, buried in thoughts too deep for any ordinary happening to disturb her.

Showy Joe Hoover was used to these spells, and he made no attempt to hasten her decision. He lay back on his pillow, watching that immovable figure, that strong, reckless face, waiting for the end with what patience he could summon.

The spell was broken, at last, and Roxy Ringgold sprang to her feet, with clinched hands and brightly gleaming eyes. She flashed an instinctive glance around, then came closer to her husband.

"It's his life or ours, Joel. We've got to kill Luther Larrimer, or he'll kill us!" she had decided.

"But—how?" Hoover wanted to know. "I've tried so often, only to slip up on it every time! How? That's the question, Roxy!"

"That's just what we have got to decide upon, Joe, and before this night comes to an end! We can't trust Tiger Trick any longer. We've got to play our own hand from this time on, Joe Hoover!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUEEN OF THE TREASURE-SEEKERS.

"Careful, Ben Harris! If you scare my fish, you shall go hungry this night!"

Distinct the warning, though couched in a guarded tone, but though the fair fisher frowned, she never turned her eyes in the other

direction. The trout were in the humor for biting, just as Zelda Passadena was in the humor for catching them, and though their very voracity was evidence enough that few, if any, lines had been wet in those waters before, it is hard to forget old traditions.

Zelda was perched on a nearly submerged rock, to reach which she had been forced to leap from shore. There was no foothold to spare, and while the trout were not over-sized, they were fierce fighters when once they felt the steel prick their jaws.

Possibly a feminine dread of getting wet through an unlucky slip of the foot on that rounding surface, had something to do with it, but certain it is that Zelda never turned her eyes to note how had fared the young man whose name passed her lips so pettishly.

Yet it was an awkward place for a fall, and a shower of loose and loosened stones bore Ben Harris company in that downward slide. He brought up in a narrow opening between two rocks, which saved him from plunging into the little river, at the cost of sundry bruises.

The young fellow gave a groan, as he cleared his eyes sufficiently to catch sight of the fair fisher-woman, and that ominous sound did what his fall had failed to accomplish. Zelda Passadena turned her face quickly, a question leaping to her lips:

"You're hurt, Harris? Why didn't—oh—"

There came a sharp tug at her line, then a fierce rush as an unusually large trout felt the steel. And, as Zelda turned again, her foot slipped and she plunged into the foaming stream.

Her involuntary cry found an echo in that which burst from the lips of Ben Harris. His bruises were forgotten, and when Zelda rose from her involuntary plunge, half-strangled, another splash of cold water was flung into her as her rescuer struck the waves close by her.

"Don't be afraid, Zelda!" spluttered the young man, dashing his long hair back from his eyes as he came to the surface. "I'll save you or we'll die together!"

"Don't bother! Save my fish—quick!" cried the maiden, evading rather than seeking support, far the coolest of the two just then, since she could think of rod and line with its involuntary captive, notwithstanding the sullen roar of the really dangerous rapids only a few rods below their present position.

Then, seeing that the young man hardly understood her meaning, Zelda herself swam rapidly down-stream, catching the rod and holding it with a firm grip while making the shore.

"If you can't make it alone, Harris, I'll lend a hand as soon as I make sure of this beauty!" called out the young woman, with a fleeting glance at the young fellow.

Ben Harris gave vent to a groan, and felt almost tempted to cease his struggles and permit the current to carry him into the rapids, where breath and life would quickly be beaten out of his miserable body.

Why was it he seemed fated ever to make himself ridiculous while trying his level best to win at least a look of approval from those glorious eyes? He coveted her love—he could only win her contempt!

"Why don't you come out, Ben?" cried Zelda, as she drew her desperately fighting trout within reach of her small but strong hand. "If you want—Are you hurt, man?"

"Who wouldn't be, when— No, Miss Passadena, I'm not hurt—to speak of," a sulky sort of manhood coming back to him at that tone.

What if he was short, and slender, and his face as smooth as that of a year-old child? Was that any reason why she should treat him as a weakling, as one almost beneath her pity? Was he not a man, with all a man's passions and hopes? Did he not come of as good—ay, better by far!—a family as hers?

If he now filled the despised position of camp-cook, was it not for her dear sake? It was to be near her, not for the few dollars paid him for his services, that he hired out to Miguel Passadena. And now, when he was risking his own life in hopes of doing her a service, Zelda cared less for his escape than that of the booked trout! Fired by a sense of his own wrongs, Ben Harris made the shore, and never once looked up into that darkly beautiful face as Zelda Passadena bade him collect her fish, and bring them after her to camp.

"You've spoiled my sport, Benjamin, and if the fish falls short, you must bear the blame. It's too cool here for—Has father come back? Did he send you to look me up?"

"No, Miss Zelda: he hadn't come back when I left camp."

"Then why did you— Look up, Ben Harris!"

her voice changing from inquiry to command. "Look me squarely in the eyes—so."

There was love in that gaze, but the young woman failed to recognize it just then. She saw something else, and looked for nothing more.

"I knew it! You're trying to hide something from me, Ben Harris! What is it? If father didn't send you, why were you after me?"

While watching the unsuspecting fisher, from his perch among the rocks, Ben Harris had anticipated some such question as this, and he had carefully shaped his answer. It was full time she knew for whose dear sake he had become a camp-cook, cursed and almost kicked by the coarse rascals hired by Miguel Passadena to help him discover that fabulous crater of pure gold.

He had firmly resolved to avow his love, and win or lose all, that day. But now—once again his courage failed him before those dark, lustrous eyes!

"I wanted to tell you—something," he mumbled, smothering a dry cough. "I didn't dare wait for you to come back. Then, too, those ugly devils in camp would—"

Zelda gripped his arm tightly, her face coming closer to his, her black eyes seeming to scorch to his very brain as they strove to read his full meaning.

"You mean the men father hired, Ben Harris? What of them?"

"They're plotting against him and you, Zelda!"

"Are you crazy, boy?"

"Why do you call me boy? Why do you always treat me as though I was little better than an overgrown baby?" he cried, desperately. "I am a man grown, and I love you as hard—"

"Stop!" and a cool hand fell upon his lips. "No more of that, Benjamin Harris, unless you want me to call you crazy, instead of boy! You love me? You?"

"I do love you, Zelda, and now it's out, I'll stick to it until I die! I love you, and if I can't win your love in return, I'll never leave this wretched wilderness alive—so there!"

He finished his desperate speech, though Zelda did not wait for the end. She waved a hand toward her fish, then scaled the rocky bank, nimble and sure of foot as a mountain goat, and, unimpeded by her short skirts, fashioned for a mountain campaign, she sped along toward camp, rapid motion dispelling all chill caused by the nearly ice-cold waters.

She had changed her clothes by the time Ben Harris reached camp with her rod and her fish. She had had time to smother the half-anger, half-scorn inspired by his mad confession of love, and even smiled as he stole a dogged glance into her face while handing her the rod.

"Change your clothes, Harris, or we'll be having you down with the mountain fever," she said, coldly. "Make haste, please. I want to have a few words with you before you start dinner."

"Give a sign, and I'll put a bullet where it'll do the most good, Miss Zelda," he muttered, his face pale as death.

"Don't think of such a thing, Harris," the ghost of a smile playing about the corners of her mouth. "We can't begin to spare—you!"

"Your cook: why not say it in so many words?" gloomily muttered the young man, then turning abruptly away.

Zelda gazed after the poor fellow, that smile deepening, almost unconsciously. After all, come to look at him closely, Ben Harris was not such a lout as she had until now considered him. His figure was good, his face—but the ideal! To so boldly avow his love for her!

Zelda Passadena cast a blushing glance around the camp. Several men were visible, gathered over a deck of cards, but none of them seemed paying any attention to her or to the cook.

There were a number of horses and mules staked out to feed, but there was only the one tent; sacred to herself and father, king and queen over that little band of treasure-seekers.

What could Harris mean by his hurried words? A warning—against what? Why did he speak of yonder rough fellows as devils? What could he mean by accusing them of plotting? Plotting for what? Surely they would not dare—

Her thought broke off right at that point, for now many a little fact, passed over without thought, almost without notice, at the time of happening, flashed back upon her busy brain.

Her father's money was paying these men for their time and work, if work it could be called, that slow, irregular moving from point to point, that idle lounging in camp over cards and

pipes, while Miguel Passadena studied his little green-covered notebook, and wandered about in search of the first clew to the crater of gold.

She knew that the six stout knaves had many a covert laugh over the wild hunt: they seemed to put little faith in such a treasure, save while under the keen eyes of their present chief.

Then—why should they be plotting? And for what?

"He didn't really mean it!" was her forced conclusion, her thoughts flying back to the camp-cook. "His few wits were scattered by his fall, and all the rest. If not—"

If really sensible, how could he have dared speak to her of his love?

As her thoughts came back to this point, Zelda caught sight of Ben Harris, coming from the men's quarters, half hidden by the brush. He had changed his clothes for a dry suit, but the greatest change was in his face and carriage.

The first was paler than usual, but looked bolder, more manly. His step seemed quicker, firmer, more self-reliant than of old. It was as though her half-pitying taunt had stung him into proving himself the man he claimed to be.

"Improves him, too?" mentally decided Zelda, but losing her smile at the same time. "I'll have to treat him as a man, then; and a second transgression of that sort will find a cook out of a situation!"

Possibly Harris read some such warning in her stern face, or it might have been the knowledge that more than one pair of eyes were keenly if covertly watching his movement, just then. Be that as it may, his first words had little to do with that forbidden subject.

"How'll you have the fish cooked, Miss Zelda?" he said, in clear, yet perfectly natural tones, though he added in a hasty whisper: "Play like you thought only of grub—they're watching!"

"You mean the men, Harris?" asked the young woman, at the same time touching one of the fish which he bore in his hand.

"Yes. Don't let your face betray you, or all is lost!" in that same swift whisper. "They don't reckon I'm worth counting, either way, but if they suspect I've dropped to their game, they'll rush matters."

"What do you suspect them of?"

"They're either growing tired of such slow work, or else they've decided that there really is a gold crater near by. If the last, they mean to take possession, even at the cost of killing your father, and—"

"Careful!" cautioned Zelda, forcing a smile at the same time and looking up into the camp-cook's face. "Blinky Rivers is coming, and there's no time for—you understand, Harris?"

"Yes'm," nodded Ben, backing away. "I'll fix 'em to suit if I kin. And—Pritty nice string, Mr. Rivers, don't you reckon? The queen caught every last one of 'em, too!"

"Which'll make 'em chaw mighty sight sweeter, too!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A FURY IN FUR.

"A COMPLIMENT from your lips, Blinky?"

There was a general start at sound of that voice, and all eyes were turned toward the tall, athletic figure which just then came in sight, hidden until then by the tent itself.

"Father!"

"The boss!"

"No less, both of you," assured Miguel Passadena, with a smile upon his hard, lined face. "What were you talking about, Rivers?"

"Jest sayin' them fish wouldn't taste any the wuss fer bein' tuck by the queen, boss," answered the one-eyed ruffian, giving a glance at the retreating camp-cook. "But, what I come to say, really, was ef any harm come to the leddy? One o' the boys told me she looked like she'd ketch'd a tumble into the drink."

"Zelda, pet?"

"I did, but no harm's done, father," laughed Zelda, then briefly describing her little adventure, mercifully omitting the part played by Harris, save what would redound to his credit. "Of course there was no danger, so far above the rapids, but Harris didn't stop to ask that. He meant well, at all events."

"Ary sign o' finding the crater, boss?" asked Rivers, lifting a hand to stroke his bristling beard, or else to hide the sneering smile that caused it to move.

"Not yet. I'll let you know when I do, without the trouble of asking, Blinky," curtly replied the chief, passing into the tent, after his daughter.

Zelda watched the burly ruffian as he slouched back to where his mates were still engaged in playing cards. Her brain was working fast, and

already she had determined to say nothing of that broken warning. It could do no good to disturb her father, and only add to the worry which was already wearing his strong frame. Time enough when she could learn in full the cause of Ben Harris's alarm.

Neither did Miguel Passadena seem inclined for conversation, once satisfied that no harm had come to his child. He flung himself upon the blanket-covered pile of leaves, closing his eyes like one weary in body if not in mind.

Although no one would think of calling "Arizona Mike" a handsome man, with his gaunt, lined visage, there was a certain resemblance to be traced in both faces. Yet Zelda fell short of being a beauty only by a shade; she would have been one, if reared in luxury, if richly garbed, if shielded from storms and the tanning sun.

Miguel Passadena was of mixed blood; it only required a glance to decide as much. His father had been an Indian, his mother a Mexican woman, taken captive in a raid across the Rio Grande.

His early days had been passed as an Indian, but then he found his way back to his mother's people, finally drifting into the States. He married an American woman, quite late in life, and though Zelda, his one child, was barely eighteen years of age, her father was quite sixty.

Still, he was much younger than his years, physically speaking. His long hair and sparse beard were unmixed with gray, black as the wing of a crow. His frame was sinewy and active, and few men of his age could have endured as much toil or hardship.

He had been a good father, too, so far as his limited light would allow. He had given Zelda several years' schooling, in a convent kept by the Sisters of Charity, and since her coming back to him, had lavished money upon her wants or whims, whenever he had gold in hand.

That was not always. He was too much Indian to settle down and work, or go into business. And Zelda, too, preferred this roving life at first. Now, as she grew older, her ideas were beginning to change. She began to contrast her life with that of other girls who had been her mates at school, and she vaguely longed for something better.

If this adventure only proved successful: if they could but find that fabled crater of gold: then she would try to coax her father into leading a more civilized life!

She was still thinking of this, when dinner was announced by Ben Harris, and Miguel Passadena roused up from his doze.

"This evening—the rest!" Zelda managed to breathe, softly, as she took the dishes brought by the cook. "Make a chance, please!"

Harris nodded his comprehension, then hurried away to attend to the wants of the hired men.

A rough, reckless-looking lot, all six of them. And Blinky Rivers, with his one empty socket, his scarred face, his bulldog jaws, his coarse, heavy voice, seemed the worst of them all.

A wiser man than Miguel Passadena would hardly have risked his own life in such vile company, much less that of a really beloved daughter; but the serpent of avarice had bitten Arizona Mike most deeply, and he could not waste an hour after once getting that long-coveted notebook into his grip.

For that reason he had taken the first men to offer: six of the toughest characters among all the rascals who had flocked to the banner of Tiger Trick McAllister, when he defiantly built the Half-Way House.

"Same old story, mates!" Blinky Rivers had reported, after the coming back to camp of their employer. "Ef thar really is a gold crater, he hain't found it!"

"Or says he hasn't, any way!" amended a wiry little knave, called Fred Ott.

"Ef he finds it at all, he's got to find it mighty quick!" nodded Rivers, snapping his yellow teeth together.

Unsuspicious of all this, Miguel Passadena hurriedly swallowed his dinner, then lit his pipe for his customary smoke. Presently he spoke:

"Zelda, watch your chance when the men don't look, and go back of the tent—yonder!" with a nod to point his words.

"And you, father?"

"I'll follow, after a bit. I've got something to tell you, and—"

"You haven't found it, father?"

"Not yet, but I believe—drop it!" giving a suspicious glance around them. "I reckon the men are square, but I'll not fling temptation in their way. Go, when you can steal away unseen. I'll drop the flap, and they'll reckon we're taking a siesta, as usual, of late."

Zelda obeyed, asking no further questions, and

in less than half an hour more, father and daughter had left camp out of sight, and were walking briskly toward the still higher ground lying nearly due north.

They were talking of the gold crater; there was only one subject on which Passadena could or would talk, in those days.

"You know what we made out of those confused notes, child," he said, as they pressed onward. "You know that Huck Shaw took down nearly every word that fell from the lips of Cranky Jordan, when he lay on his death-bed. Then, too, there were all the maps, the lines, the words written by Jordan himself, before his death."

"I know," nodded Zelda. "It was hard work, and took both time and patience to sift out the essential facts. But I believe we did that much, father."

"If not, then I've thrown my good money away, to say nothing of—*But we did!* We found the right clew, Zelda!"

"I believe it, father," she said, soothingly. "And if we can find that lava tunnel Jordan raved about, in his last hours, we'll surely find the crater of gold!"

"We will find it—I firmly believe I am leading the way direct to that very tunnel, Zelda!"

"Oh, father!"

"I would have been sure, by this time, if I had kept on. But—I thought of you, little girl," with a laugh as he gently touched that jetty head-covering. "I turned back, to bring you to share the glorious discovery, my angel!"

Or the bitter disappointment!

Zelda could not help thinking that; the words almost forced themselves through her compressed lips.

And what would failure mean? Could that fever-worn man bear up against another failure, particularly since his hopes had soared so high? Would not the heavy blow crush him, for all time?

Zelda grew pale and averted her face, lest Passadena should read her fears therein. But he saw it not. He could only talk—talk—talk about the vast treasure which had waited their coming for so long, and of what they would do when it was once gleaned.

He was too excited to explain why he had such strong hopes, after so many failures, and Zelda hardly dared ask him, lest he divine her doubts. But, troubled though she was, she could not help noting stray patches of—surely it was lava!

If so—and she could hardly doubt that much—was this hope so very wild? Cranky Jordan, in his clearer hours, had often declared that himself and partner had come upon the crater through a regular tunnel of lava, the outside of which had cooled and hardened while the inside flowed out, leaving a long tub-like formation. Then had come the grizzly bears—by scores, hundreds, thousands!

Of course that part was insane raving, but where did truth end and error begin? Certain it was that poor Jordan had been terribly mauled by something; his body was one mass of scars, his limbs distorted through imperfect knitting after being fractured. A grizzly bear might easily have inflicted all those injuries. Then—how much of the rest was truth?

"We'll mighty soon know, Zelda!" assured Passadena, as if to answer her troubled thoughts, pointing toward the hill which towered up before them. "If that isn't the crater, then—but it is! It must be the crater!" he broke off, almost viciously shaking his tightly clinched fist toward the hill.

As though that cry had been a challenge, there came back an ominous whoof! followed almost immediately by the gray front of a huge grizzly bear, pushing through the bushes directly in their front.

For a single breath all three paused, motionless, staring at each other. Hardly a score yards divided them from the big brute, and both man and woman seemed fairly petrified by the spectacle.

Only for a single breath. Then, his hand dropping to his revolver, Miguel Passadena cried aloud:

"Run, girl! Run—dodge—for life!"

His voice rose almost to a shriek for the grizzly gave a roar, opened its mighty jaws and plunged out of the bushes in a death-charge!

Passadena flung up his pistol-hand and fired several shots, though none knew better than he how harmless such loads would be, unless one or more of the pellets reached the brain, through those little red eyes.

More savagely the bear roared, and Miguel Passadena turned coward, just when he most needed all his coolness and nerve. He forgot his

loved child, for the moment and turned in headlong flight!

Knowing how helpless she was, armed only with a light revolver, Zelda had obeyed that hasty command, taking to flight, but in her fright running against a rock which barred her way.

She caught a glimpse of the bear charging, and with a really superhuman effort, she scaled the rock, falling over its narrow top the next instant, just as the monster came charging past her recent position.

It reared up against the rock, savagely snapping its teeth as it lost sight of the girl, but another victim was in sight, and it charged swiftly after Passadena, who was making for the nearest tree: a poor, slender, half-dead aspen at that!

But, he was too blinded by sudden terror to reason, and with cat-like activity he was halfway up the tree when the grizzly gained its foot, rearing up and using both teeth and claws in a manner that caused white splinters to fly. Then, with one mighty shake, the top snapped off short, and Miguel Passadena fell headlong to the ground!

CHAPTER IX.

FROM THE GRIZZLY'S CLAWS.

A WILD yell broke from the lips of the unfortunate man as he felt his frail refuge begin to swing and sway before that savage assault, but he could hardly have realized how much this might mean, before the coming of the end.

The tree was slender, and had been attacked by decay. In his blind terror, Miguel Passadena climbed past the limit of safety, and when those mighty paws sent the stem shivering back and forth, the man's weight lent a still more dangerous impulse, until the rotting wood gave way, the tree snapping short off.

Another wild yell came from his lips as Passadena shot through the air, doubled up like a ball, yet still clinging to the tree-top. And to this fact he probably owed his preservation from broken bones, if not from instant death itself.

The heavy shock as the dry top struck the rocky surface first, tore Passadena from his hold, plunging him headlong into a mass of splintered twigs and limbs; but, even as he struck, that horrible roar smote upon his ears, and he seemed to rebound like a rubber.

Miguel drew the first weapon his hand chanced to touch; his long-bladed knife. No need to search for his terrible adversary; right before him showed those glowing eyes, those red jaws with an arming of white teeth, driven onward by that mountain of muscle in fur.

It was a charge that even a stone wall could hardly have resisted, much less a single man, armed only with a poor knife, and he half-stunned by his recent fall.

All this took place with great rapidity, and all this Zelda Passadena took in almost at a single glance, as she sprang around the end of the rock to which she surely owed her escape from instant death.

Those wild yells, coming from the lips of her parent, so full of mingled fear and vain appeal, caused the maiden to forget herself, so far as personal danger went. She sprang forward with a shrill cry, drawing her little revolver and opening fire upon the enraged beast.

She saw her father desperately face the grizzly, knife in hand, as though he hoped to save his life with that poor weapon. She saw the huge bear strike with one fore-paw as it charged, and—

A blood-red mist seemed to spread before her eyes, shutting out that frightful sight.

Passadena had barely time to make out the bear, charging as a bear always charges, popular fancy to the contrary notwithstanding, on all-fours.

He struck out viciously with his knife; but, that was all. The steel never reached its mark, and the gold-seeker had no time granted him in which to flee, or even to dodge.

With a swiftness remarkable in one seemingly so clumsy, the grizzly swung its fore-paw around and forward, its long claws spread to their greatest extent. A sickening sound followed, and the man was hurled aside, those terrible claws tearing away cloth, skin and flesh, laying the bones bare and scattering a bloody spray over the bleached rocks across which the gold-seeker was hurled.

It was this sight that caused Zelda to turn sick and faint for an instant; then the Indian blood in her veins stung her to vengeance, and with a shrill, fierce cry she sprang toward the raging beast, sending a bullet into its neck as its head turned to answer that scream.

Passadena had fallen behind a low rock, out

of sight for the moment, while Zelda was in fair view. That was enough to direct the brute, stung by those shots, and with a savage roar the grizzly turned to charge up the hill, on the half-crazed girl.

Zelda met its charge with another shot, the lead bringing a little puff of fur from that tough skull, doing no harm to its owner, and only increasing its rage. Another equally vain shot, then a series of dull clicks as the pointed hammer fell on empty shells alone!

For the first time Zelda thought of herself. Her pistol was empty, and there was no time for reloading. She flung the pistol at the charging brute, drawing her knife instead.

Flight would have been vain, where the ground was so rough and broken, covered with stones and boulders and scrubby bushes; but Zelda gave that no thought. The mangled form of her father was ever before her eyes, his agonized scream still rung in her ears. If she could not avenge, she could share his awful fate.

No sane person would ever have thought of facing such a huge brute as this, with only a frail blade to depend upon; but the poor girl was not sane—that awful sight had turned her brain for the time being.

"Jump aside—dodge, for your life!" came a clear, sharp cry, and as though she took them as an echo of the warning given by her father only a few moments before, Zelda obeyed, just in time to escape the deadly stroke aimed at her by the grizzly.

Several shots rung out in swift succession, as two men sprang into sight and boldly charged in upon the snarling beast.

"Stiddy! Not too durn cluss, lad!" roared a voice quite fit to match that of the wounded grizzly. "Sock it to 'um, but don't— Now I hev got ye!"

Regardless of himself, so long as his loved chum obeyed that warning, Poley Applejohn sprang forward, improving the moment when the bear turned its head to snap at a stinging rifle wound.

One big hand clutched that hairy coat to steady himself, the other drove a long blade deep into the side of the grizzly furthest from himself, for Poley had hunted bears before, and knew how surely they turn to the side from whence a wound seems to come.

It was so in this case, and after a savage snap at the deep-biting blade, the grizzly plunged forward, blood pouring through its open jaws and spurting from behind its shoulder.

"Didn't I know it?" laughed the giant, springing aside, the instant his blow was delivered. "Ketched him, fu'st— Look out, lad! He's dead, but—look out!"

It was a blind charge, but the grizzly was headed directly for Zelda, and one touch of those mighty paws would surely end her life.

No man could know this better than Light-heart Lute. With a bound he gained her side, flinging rather than lifting her out of the way, following after in awkward shape as his foot tripped over a protruding root.

Straight across the spot where Zelda had stood but a second before the grizzly plunged, then fell heavily, actually dying while yet in motion.

"He didn't tetch ye, lad?" eagerly asked Applejohn, springing to where Larrimer had fallen.

"No. I'm all right," and the Lad of Luck regained his feet, revolver in hand. "Where—it's settled, then?"

"Bet ye!" and the giant smiled grimly as he wiped the blood from his trusty blade. "I hain't forgot the tickle-spot, an' when I once— The gal, lad?"

"It didn't have a chance to touch her, so— maybe she struck her head in falling," his tones changing as he turned to Zelda, who lay in an awkward position, just as that timely thrust had sent her from the grizzly's claws.

"Better see what's wrong, lad," advised Poley, his honest face turning grave once more. "I'll jest make sure the critter is dead, then I'll hev a look at the pore feller over yer," and the big fellow strode to where the grizzly lay, blood still flowing freely from its open jaws. A single glance assured him that no life lingered there, yet a low ejaculation rose to his lips as he caught sight of something half-hidden by the bear's right paw.

Lute's old pard bent over and lifted the paw. A green-covered notebook was sticking to it.

Two of those long claws had been driven through and through the book, no doubt by the same stroke that sent Passadena flying through the air.

Applejohn cast a quick glance toward his partner, but Lute was busied in restoring the

maiden to consciousness, and with a swift movement the giant pulled the notebook from those claws, slipping it into his breast, saying to himself:

"Ef he don't know, the lad won't hev to lie when ary critter comes to ax whar it's gone. Fer me—waal, I don't choke too easy!"

"Poley! come here—I want your flask!" now called out Lute.

The giant obeyed, watching that pale face for a few moments before saying:

"She'll come through all right, lad, never you fret. It's jest the skeer, an' that bump she ketched on the head o' her when you sent her turnin' a flip-flop, like."

"I didn't mean—there wasn't time for milder measures."

"Don't I know! An' so'll she, when she comes to. Party, eh?"

"I haven't had time to think about that, but—you've looked after that poor devil, Poley?" flashing a glance toward the spot where Passadena had been tossed by the grizzly.

"I hain't, but I'm gwine to now. Not that I reckon it's much use, so to speak. A common man don't call for more'n one sech lick as he ketched—no they don't, now!"

Shaking his head grimly, the giant was starting in that direction, when he caught sight of a stranger hastening up the slope, revolver drawn, like one who expected to find use for the weapon.

"Eyes open, lad!" warningly. "Critter comin', an' ef he ain't a tough, then he'd orter sue his face fer slander!"

"Hellow, you!" called out Blinky Rivers, his pistol-hand coming forward and his body sinking nearly out of sight behind a convenient boulder. "What's up? See ary thing o' the boss an' his gal up hyar?"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," grunted the big fellow, taking an instantaneous dislike to the scarred ruffian. "I'm jest gwine fer a look at a man critter yen' b'ar bit a clip, over yonder. Ef he was your boss, though, I'm open to lay odds you're out of a job this quick!"

"It's the boss—fer thar's his gal!" cried Rivers, his one eye doing good service. "I know the glimps' o' her dress, an'— Whar's the boss, you say?"

Poley Applejohn did not take the trouble to say, striding across to where he had caught a glimpse of Passadena after that terrible paw-stroke.

Blinky Rivers followed, shifting his pistol to his left hand, but still keeping it from its holster. Treacherous himself, and recognizing this big fellow from report, he more than half expected to have to fight for his life.

Still, avarice conquered fear, just then, and he was beside the giant when Applejohn reached Passadena.

It was a gruesome sight. Those long claws had wrought deadly work, laying bare the gold-seeker's breastbone, loosening several of his ribs, tearing the muscles and flesh into quivering strips.

Yet Passadena was still alive!

"It's the boss, shore enough!" muttered Rivers, kneeling beside the breathing but unconscious man. "Git water—do somethin' to stop the bleedin', or he's a goner!"

His fingers were busy as he spoke, but, while pretending to replace those quivering strips and folds of flesh, Rivers was searching for the clew to the crater of gold!

His touch caused Passadena to shrink and moan. His eyes opened, his lips parted, a few words came faintly, but one was the name of his child.

As though her heart responded to the voice her ears surely could not have heard, with a sobbing cry Zelda, pale as death, came flying to her father's side.

"I reckon we'll take a walk, critter!" muttered Applejohn, gripping Rivers by an arm and jerking him to his feet.

CHAPTER X.

BLINKY RIVERS TAKES CHARGE.

ALTHOUGH he showed his teeth, the one-eyed knave knew better than attempt open resistance. That grip threatened to crush his arm, and those blue-gray eyes were blazing with a fire which seemed to scorch his flesh.

"You cain't do him no good, critter," muttered Applejohn, leading Rivers away from the spot, his honest face turning a shade whiter as he caught that piteous moan of grief. "He's a dead man a'ready, an' his pore gal is jestly 'titled to what's left o' his time."

"How'd it come 'bout, an' what fetched you hyar, strangers?" Rivers asked, after an awkward pause.

"The same that fetched you, I reckon; shoot-in' an' yelpin'," was the curt response. "Lucky fer the gal, we happened to be a bit closer to hand, though."

With those words the big fellow turned away, passing over to where the grizzly lay in its blood.

He knew that the one-eyed ruffian was watching him, but that fact gave him little trouble. His brain was busy, and that green-covered notebook played an important part in his thoughts.

"The pizen critter was huntin' fer some-thin' while pretendin' to keer for yen' pore feller. Fer what? Fer what I've got snugglin' in my boosum, no less, dug-gun his ugly pelt!"

This belief did not lessen his instinctive dislike for Rivers, but it furnished a sufficient excuse for the rascal's presence. If he was one of the men employed by Miguel Passadena, he had a right to be where that employer lay, so long as he did not actually interfere with the daughter's rights to the last breath of her parent.

Blinky Rivers moved restlessly about. He examined the dead bear, then turned to watch what was going on about Passadena. He scowled blackly as he noted the face and figure of the Lucky Lad, who stood near the dying man and his child, his head bared and respectfully bent.

"Durn him!" was his mental snarl while that inspection lasted. "Don't I know the critter? Cain't I guess what's fetched him all this long ways? Don't I know what he's waitin' fer? That green book, no less!"

That thought seemed to bring a decision, for Blinky Rivers turned aside to where a quantity of dead leaves had drifted before the wind, heaping up in a rocky angle. Quickly making two piles of fuel a few yards apart, he struck a match and set them on fire, adding dampened sticks to the clear blaze, as though to increase the volume of smoke.

"That looks sort o' Injuny, stranger," remarked Applejohn, whose eyes were following his every motion. "What mought ye be playin' it fer, ef the askin' ain't too much?"

"You know what fetched them two 'way out hyar, don't ye, pardner?" asked Rivers, with an upward flash from his single eye.

"Ef I do, I don't know it," glibly lied the big fellow. "Mebbe you kin tell a feller?"

"Ef I can't, nobody kin," with a short nod. "The dug-gundest wild-goose chase you ever hearn tell of! But that don't count, jest now. I'm one o' the men he hired to go 'long. Thar's six others not so mighty fur away. An' now harm's come to the boss, they want to know it. So—see?"

"Them two smokes is to call 'em up, I reckon?"

"Thar you've got it, stranger! Them smokes is to call 'em up, an' the boys 'll come a-whoopin' when they once catches sight, too!"

The subject was dropped right there, for Light-heart Lute was rapidly approaching them, his face unusually grave and pale. He nodded, in response to the inquiring glance cast into his face by Applejohn.

"Yes, the poor fellow has recovered his senses, but I don't see how he can live much longer. I never saw a worse wound, and so little can be done for it! That's the hardest part of all, to me!"

"You don't reckon he kin pull through, then?" asked Rivers, his one eye drooping, to hide that treacherous glow.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"One o' his men—an' thar's the others!" lifting his voice exultantly as the faint sound of distant shouting came floating up from the lower ground. "The smoke's fetched 'em in a hurry! Kin I give a yelp or two, jest to make 'em shorer, stranger?"

"Ef ye want a fist the bigness o' that rammed down your gullet, critter, jest try it on!" growled Applejohn, lifting his clenched right hand. "Thar's a dyin' man, an' a grievin' gal; would ye kill the one an' craze the other, with your howlin'?"

Blinky Rivers turned away with a surly growl, collecting fresh fuel for his signal smokes. He cast frequent glances toward the two chums, who drew apart, conversing in low tones, keeping watch over the wounded man and his sorrowing daughter.

"She seems stunned, and I doubt if she fully realizes how mighty bad he is hurt," said Larrimer, gravely.

"Too mighty bad hurt to git over it. But—what'll we do when the gang comes up, lad?"

"Time enough to decide, later, Poley. There's one thing we can't do, and that is to leave yonder poor girl alone at their mercy!"

Applejohn made no reply, though his brows contracted and a look of trouble came into his honest eyes. He was sympathetic as another, but judging the others by Rivers, this resolve would force them into a very hard crowd. Then, too, the object which had brought them so far into the mountains; would that be helped, or foiled by this tragedy?

Light-heart Lute gave a start, as he saw Zelda arise and come toward them, pale as a ghost, yet moving freely, strongly.

"What is it?" he asked, advancing to meet the maiden.

"Father—can nothing be done?" asked Zelda, choking back her grief by a desperate effort. "Must he lie there, bleeding—oh, for love of heaven! try and do something for my poor father!"

"Come, Poley! I wanted to try, my child, but I was afraid of hurting you," he hastily added, as they moved toward the spot where Passadena was lying. "And yet, 'twill be more in seeming than in reality. His nerves were numbed by that blow. He will hardly feel it to have his hurts bandaged. I swear this to you, my poor child. Will you not believe me when I say so?"

Zelda gazed steadily into those kindly sympathetic eyes for a brief space, then bowed, choking back a sob.

"I will—I do believe and trust you. Only—do what lies in your power to help him. I will aid—I'm strong—and see!"

She stretched out an arm, trying bravely to check its trembling.

Nodding to Applejohn, Larrimer turned away, to do what lay in his power, though secretly believing that Passadena would surely die before bandages could be applied. Yet that belief did not hold his hand, and making the best of their scanty appliances, the two chums fell to bandaging that ghastly wound.

Blinky Rivers left his smokes to keep the two chums closely under his suspicious eye, making sure that neither of them took aught of importance from the person of the injured gold-seeker. And then, when his mates came up in response to his signal, he quickly threw off all disguise, and at once took charge.

"That was the 'greement atwixt us, ef any thing was to happen to knock him out or lay him up," he said, in explanation. "An' fu'st of all, I was to make sure they didn't no harm come to one thing: I'm gwine to see ef he's got it on his body, ef you don't 'bjeet, strangers!"

With swift fingers, Blinky Rivers searched the body, failing to find the coveted object, giving a vicious snarl through his beard as he was convinced the notebook had vanished.

"I reckon neither o' you two gents happened to see or pick it up, did ye?" he asked, flashing suspicious looks into their faces.

"What was it?" asked Larrimer, curtly.

"A little flat book, with a sorter green kiver onto it."

"I haven't seen anything of it, sir," then turning aside to where Zelda, sick and almost swooning from that ordeal, lay against a sloping rock.

"No more hev I, so ye needn't try to look the bark off o' a feller, critter," nodded Applejohn. "Ef he toted it whar most men tote thar valuables, in his boosum, I reckon the b'ar done scattered it all over this quarter-section!"

Rivers passed a guarded word to his mates, and they searched the ground for rods around, but in vain. Nothing was to be seen of the missing notebook, and as a last resource the one-eyed knave came back to Miguel Passadena.

Though so frightfully injured, the gold-seeker was still living, and had consciousness enough left to recognize his name when Rivers pronounced it, close to his ear.

His lids quivered, then lifted. His sunken eyes gave a gleam of recognition, but whether at sight of that scarred face, or because of the words which followed, would be difficult to say.

"Whar's the book, boss?" asked Rivers, trying to keep his words from Applejohn's ears, yet make his meaning clear to the injured man. "I've went through your clo'es, but it hain't thar. It's fer Zelda, you know, an' ef it's lost—"

"Zelda—for her—all!" painfully gasped the gold-seeker. "She has—keep—"

A fierce grip closed on the shoulder of the covetous ruffian, and as he looked up, the flashing eyes of Light-heart Lute made him flinch.

"Do you want to murder him, man?" sternly whispered the Lad of Luck. "Look at his face! Another word may end his chances forever!"

Blinky Rivers gave a growl, but, as he looked at the face of his employer, the change which

even those few words had brought about, told him he must desist, for the present, at least.

"All right," he muttered, rising to his feet and slouching from under that grip. "I didn't mean no hurt. I was takin' thought fer her. But I reckon—let it go, fer now, then!"

He moved away to where his mates were still engaged in their vain search, and dropped a few words into each ear.

"I reckon it's all right. Ef I didn't mistake his meanin', the gal hes got the book. Keep all eyes open, an' we'll make the raffle yit!"

Then, assuming an air of grave respect, Rivers approached Zelda, who was rallying from the terrible shock, looking and acting far more like her usual self. Doffing his hat, the fellow spoke:

"It don't seem right fer to leave the pore boss in sech a onhandy place, Miss Zelda. Ef you'll let us rig up a litter an' tote him back to camp, it'd be heap sight easier an' better then ef we shifted camp up hyar. What say?"

Zelda turned to ask advice of those who had so gallantly come to her rescue, but they had drawn apart, and Ben Harris was just passing close by them.

"Don't leave her alone with those devils, for love of God!" the camp-cook hastily whispered while passing. "Help her, if you're men!"

"We've got to do it, Poley!" said Lute, in the same guarded tones.

"It'll be our death to try it on, lad!"

"Then—good-by, Poley! I'm going it alone, if you fail me," was the quiet response. "I'll never leave her in such hands, without—"

"Rig up a litter, boys!" called out Rivers, at that juncture. "We've got to git the boss down to camp, whar he kin hev the right sort o' 'tendin'. Work lively, now! Time's a-passin'."

When his men were fairly at work, Rivers approached the chums, forcing a smile that was meant to express gratitude for their services.

"You're clean white, gents, an' I'll never fer-git ye fer the trouble you've tuck fer the boss an' the queen. Good-by, both o' ye!"

"Don't you reckon you're just a bit previous, stranger? We couldn't think of falling off until the lady and her father is safe at camp."

"But—ef they tain't room? Ef I should say you hain't wanted?"

"I wouldn't try it on, ef I was you, critter!" grimly nodded the big fellow. "It's onhealthy feelin' up hyar, an' rather then be left abind, I do think we'd make a fight. An' that—mebbe you knows what it'll mean, when I tell ye it's jest sport fer us to lick a clean dozen o' better men then ever trompled in your shoe-leather?"

"Oh, if you raaly want to go, why I'll— All right, then!"

CHAPTER XI.

A COLD-BLOODED RASCAL.

BLINKY RIVERS shrunk back, then shuffled away to where his fellows were preparing the litter.

"Don't let your angry passions rise, little boy!" softly suggested the Lad of Luck, smiling as his gaze followed the one-eyed rascal. "Since you're not going along with me, wouldn't it be just as well if you tried to smooth instead of roughening the way, Napoleon?"

"Who ain't gwine 'long 'o you?" echoed the big fellow.

"You're not, according to your own words a bit ago, Poley."

"Then I lied ef I did, but I didn't. Did I ever let ye go whar I was skeered to foller?"

"You generally led, Poley, thanks to your long legs," laughed Lute.

"Then I'm too old fer new tricks, lad. Whar you go, thar I'm gwine too, ef it bites a leg off! Need, too, I reckon," with a low, hard laugh as he watched the movements of the party. "Thar's heap sight too much pizen cussedness piled up thar in a heap fer ary one pa'r o' eyes to keep track of! You're dead sot on gwine, lad?"

"Is that one-eyed knave a fit guardian for a girl like that, Poley? And he's as good as taken the leadership, already!"

Applejohn shook his head, slowly, tugging dubiously at his long beard, stealing occasional glances into the face of his comrade.

Philanthropy was all right enough, in its place and within certain limits. He, too, felt sincerely sorry for this young woman, on whom the hand of fate had fallen so heavily. But—what would the end be?

Larrimer intercepted one of those glances, and a flush crept into his honest face. Right or wrong, he put a young man's interpretation upon that troubled look, and lost no time in answering.

"Poley, you haven't forgotten what I told you about my—the young lady I mean to marry, if she'll have me?"

"Not yit, lad. But—"

"I've only known her a little while, counting by days, but I couldn't love her harder if we'd been brought up together from childhood. I'd cut off my best hand before I'd do anything to hurt her feelings, and I'd die before I'd bring a tear to her eye, knowingly."

"I know; I felt jest so afore Little Chiquita tuck me, lad," nodded the giant, turning his face aside, quickly. "Don't trouble to say any more, lad, fer I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't mean it, Poley, but 'twas in your eyes, all the same. Of course I can't compare this poor child with my Grace, but she is a woman, and in sore trouble. She needs our help now, and she'll need it still worse before the sun goes down, I'm afraid. She shall have all I can give her, and if I'm not mightily off, she'll have yours, too."

"I'd be 'shamed to face my little woman ef I held back, lad!" the big fellow muttered, forgetting or banishing all his doubts. "All I meant was to see ef you'd counted up what it'll cost, ef them ugly critters pan out 'cordin to tha'r mugs. It'll take the two o' us to keep 'em shet o' the gal, let 'lone what fetched us this fur from home. You've fergot that, lad!"

"The gold crater, you mean? No, I haven't. What her father knew, his child surely knows, and in guarding her, we'll be all the more apt to get at the truth of my father's disappearance, unless Huck Shaw died with a lie on his lips!"

Applejohn made no reply, for the rude litter was completed, and Blinky Rivers seemed about to shift the injured gold-seeker. More than half believing that any attempt to move the injured man would prove his death, or rather hasten it, the chums hastened back, Light-heart Lute taking it upon himself to learn the daughter's wishes.

That was briefly done. She wished her father taken to camp, where he could be better cared for, unless Larrimer felt that such removal would make matters worse.

"I don't think it will," he said, honestly enough, though his cheek flushed a bit as he knew how wrongly Zelda would interpret his words.

With all care the injured gold-seeker was lifted upon the litter by the two chums, Zelda hovering over him, shivering at each faint moan of pain, suffering far more than Miguel Passadena himself. For Light-heart Lute was right: that frightful blow had benumbed its recipient, and Arizona Mike suffered hardly any pain, as yet. If he was to live on, matters would be different. But—surely he could not live?

Applejohn took one end of the litter, while two stout fellows took the other end, and with Light-heart Lute on guard. In one sense, Blinky Rivers acted as guide, leading the way by the smoothest route for camp.

Larrimer called frequent halts, not so much to rest the bearers as to grant the injured man a respite from those inevitable jolts and shakings. And the last of these halts was called forth by Zelda, from whose blanched lips came a low, choking cry of fear and grief.

No need to ask the cause. The face on which they gazed was that of a dead man.

The Crater of Gold had claimed yet another victim!

It was but a little past noon, of the day following that marked by the tragic death of Miguel Passadena.

The gold-seeker was lying in his grave, as yet unmarked by any token of love, for poor Zelda had not yet rallied from the shock of his death.

She had dropped in a swoon across his body, and Poley Applejohn carried her the rest of the way in his strong arms, the dead man on the litter, borne by his hired men, following.

Lute took charge of the burial, without trouble or dispute, so far as Blinky Rivers was concerned. That worthy seemed on his best behavior for the time being, but he was only waiting the right moment for showing the cloven hoof.

That was close at hand, he told himself, and his scarred face betrayed as much, just now, as he hastened along to the rendezvous given two of his most trusted knaves.

"Here and waiting, Blinky!" came a guarded voice in answer to his low whistle. "Looks to me like you're taking a powerful lot of bother to get at a very simple end; why not strike first, then chin?"

"Who's runnin' this outfit, Dan Humphrey?" growled the one-eyed rascal, as he dropped to the ground before the two others.

"You are, of course," nodded the first speaker.

"But—we've got to do the work, haven't we?"

"You kin help, ef your chin don't run clean 'way with ye, Dan."

"That's what I've bin hintin', boss," put in the other fellow, who answered to the name of Ed Jackson. "Dan 'lows as how they're only jest two men, but it's heap easier to count 'em up then do 'em up, I'm tellin' ye!"

"You're mighty right!" nodded Rivers, with an ugly scowl. "I don't know any other couple I wouldn't pick, fer choicer!"

"We've got to take what comes, I reckon," sulkily muttered Humphrey. "They've come; they've settled down like they meant to make a stay of it, too! Wishing won't drive them away. So—what else but my way?"

"Of course we've got to down 'em both," admitted Rivers, "but that hain't the only thing, ye want to bar in the mind o' ye, mates. What fetched us all this ways? What made Arizona Mike so free with his hard dollars? The crater o' gold—no less!"

"If there is such a thing! I'd give a finger to be as sure as the old man was, but it strains my gullet—hard!"

"Beca'se you haven't picked up as many loose words as I hev," nodded Rivers, with a grin. "I tell ye, mates, tha'r's heap sight more then a crazy idee into this crater o' gold. The boss hed it all figgered out an' set down into that book with the green kiver!"

"What's become of the book, then?"

"Tha'r's the pint that's held me back up to now," scowled the man with a single eye. "I wanted to make sure I could clap the hand o' me right onto that green book when the right time come!"

"You know where it is, then?" persisted Humphrey.

"Waal, not to say jest know," hesitated Rivers, tugging at his bristly beard. "One o' them three hes got it, o' course, an' that one's the gal, by good right. Still, the Lucky Lad hes melbe tuck charge o' it ontel she gits over that sort o' daze. But that don't figger. No matter which one hes the book, it'll be in our han's afore the risin' o' 'nother sun!"

Blinky Rivers glanced from one face to the other, as though trying to read the full effect of his last speech. Neither pair of eyes met his gaze squarely, and now that the ugly deed was brought fairly before them, even those two heartless knaves seemed to hesitate.

"Leastwise," Blinky added, slowly, still tugging at his beard, "ef we all come to sech a 'greement, it kin be in our grip. The fust pint to settle is like this: is it wuth our while to do the job?"

"They's on'y two o' 'em, but them two is a mighty heap when it gits down to sober business, mind ye," slowly uttered Jackson. "An' they've both got tha'r eyes wide open—wuss luck!"

"How is it about Zelda?" asked his companion, flashing a swift glance into the scarred face of the chief rascal.

"Don't you let that worry ye, pardner. I'll look out fer the gal, an' never charge a cent extry fer my trouble, nuther!" chuckled the one-eyed ruffian.

Silence followed this speech. The two men interchanged glances, and Rivers shifted uneasily on his seat. He was shrewd enough to realize the mistake he had so carelessly made, and lost no time in smoothing over his slip.

"She won't hev a chance to bother anybody while we're gittin' shet o' the men, that is, sence she'll take a sip o' the same dose I've got in mind fer them critters. A'ter the rest is done—waal, ef any more o' ye then me keers to bother with a gal, what's the matter with settlin' the owner with the papers?"

"Gamble for her, you mean?"

"That's what!"

"That's better!" with a grim nod. "The gold, if we really find the crater, can easily be divided, but this is different. I'll agree to that; we'll gamble for the lovely Zelda!"

"Durn the gal, ef we git the gold!" growled Jackson, his little eyes aglow with avarice. "How much ye reckon it'll pan out, Blinky?"

"Nough to load down the mules, or why'd Mike buy 'em? An' I've hear'n him tell the gal that it'd take more'n one trip fer to clean out the crater, too! More'n one trip—jest think o' that, will ye?"

"That's a mighty wild bird in the bush, remember," dryly interposed Humphrey. "I'm thinking more of the two we've got to take in hand, back at camp, just now. It's mighty easy to decide on putting 'em out of the way, but when it comes to doing the work—that's different!"

"Ef we 'lowed 'em a show to kick—bet yer

sweet life!" chuckled Blinky Rivers. "But that hain't the idee, pards. They take tha'r chuck when the reg'lar time comes, don't they?"

"Sure!" nodded Humphrey, his face lighting up.

"An' I hain't see'd ary o' the two go back on his coffee, nuther."

"You mean—is that it, Blinky?"

"That's the idee, ef you mean dopin'," with an evil laugh. "I kin fix a dose that'll putt 'em sound asleep, an' then what's the matter with sendin' 'em over the range, 'without wakin' of 'em up? Eh?"

"If Harris don't drop to the trick. I don't take any stock in the boy. He's too far gone on Zelda, you want to know, Blinky!"

"Waal, one more won't make any big differ'," grunted the cold-blooded rascal, rising to his feet like one who considers his duty performed. "We'll count Ben in, if you reckon best. Then we're all agreed?"

"We are, if the other boys fall in," nodded Humphrey.

"They'll foller whar I lead, never you worry. I'll let 'em know what's up, afore supper. Reckon we'd better be gittin' back, ef only to keep an eye onto them two p'izen imps—eh?"

The three rascals left their covert and started back to camp, not one of them suspecting the truth: that Ben Harris had caught their every word since they came together.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BETTER PART OF VALOR.

"MISS ZELDA!"

She gave a slight start at that sound, one hand mechanically lifting to her forehead, her half-dazed eyes moving slowly around in quest of the owner of that voice.

She had left the tent, hardly conscious of the fact; but without going entirely out of sight of the camp, she had paused, sinking down upon a moss-covered rock, close beside a clump of dense brush.

"Don't start—don't show that I'm talking, if you love your life, Miss Zelda!" hastily added that voice, now plainly coming from one hidden by the bushes. "They're watching you, and if Blinky suspects what I'm doing, everything's lost!"

"It is Ben Harris?" faltered Zelda, that half-stupor beginning to clear away from her brain.

"Yes, and I'm trying to save you from—Zelda!" his tones, guarded though they were, vibrating with real anguish. "Those devils mean to murder your friends—me too—and serve you still worse!"

In his natural dread lest an interruption come before he could complete his warning, Harris took his chances of destroying all hope, almost unwittingly. If Zelda had been in full possession of her mental faculties, those terrible words would almost certainly have frightened her into betraying them both to the evil eye of Blinky Rivers, for that rascal was covertly keeping watch and ward over his dainty prize, as he already counted her.

As it was, the shock seemed just enough to fairly rouse Zelda from the numbed apathy into which the awful fate of her father had thrown her. And without doing aught to arouse suspicion in the brain of that thorough-paced rascal, she softly whispered:

"What do you mean? Tell me all. I can understand you—now!"

Longing yet afraid to lend her actual support, the young fellow, his honest heart overflowing with love and sympathy, hurriedly detailed the atrocious plot to which he had listened, less than an hour before. He concealed nothing, though it seemed to tear his very heart to speak of the manner in which her fate was to be decided. And without a move to betray herself, Zelda Passadena listened to all he had to say.

"You are sure you heard all this, Ben?" was her only comment.

"Every word, and more too!" came the earnest reply. "I was afraid of being interrupted if I tried to repeat each word, but I'll swear to all I've told you."

"No need. I believe you, Ben. What do you think best to be done?"

Harris gave a little gulp before replying. If he could rescue her unaided! But what could he do, singlehanded, against those six knaves?

"Tell the two men who don't belong to the gang. Ask them to help you. I'll die before harm comes to you, Miss Zelda, but—"

"All right: I'll consult with them," said Zelda, rising to her feet and turning toward the tent. "Come to me, as though to ask about

supper, and I'll let you know what is decided upon."

There was no time to say more. Blinky Rivers was slowly sauntering that way, though his suspicions could hardly have been awakened by any change in her face or manner. Probably he fancied she meant to extend her walk, and thought it best to get in motion, so as to lessen the risk of seeming to play the spy.

Zelda apparently failed to see his rude bow, as she passed within a few yards of Rivers, on her way back to the tent. Her face still wore that pitiful, dazed expression which had come into it when she woke from that death-like swoon, after the death of her father.

Zelda paused before the tent, passing a hand repeatedly across her brow, like one who is trying to remember. Then, as her gaze passed slowly over her surroundings, to rest at last upon the figure of Light-heart Lute, who lay at ease under a stunted tree, her manner quickly underwent a change, as though she recalled what was evading her brain.

She started forward, and Larrimer sprang to his feet, doffing his hat, a grave smile upon his face as Zelda drew nearer.

"You wish to speak to me, Miss Pasadena?" he asked, gently.

"Yes. I believe—my father's—can you show me where he—where he lies, sir?" faltered the maiden, hot tears coming to her eyes; the first they had shed since that sad adventure.

"I understand," bowed Larrimer, gravely, reaching her side. "If you will take my arm—"

"Thanks, but—I must begin to pluck up, you know," forcing a wan smile, but speaking distinctly, for she saw Rivers slouching closer, no doubt in hopes of surprising the secret of the notebook. "If you will show me where—father rests?"

Fortunately that was not far distant, and to gain it they were not obliged to pass entirely out of Blinky Rivers's sight, so he could not readily think of a fair excuse for joining them.

Zelda knelt beside the mound, resting her face upon it, silently weeping. Even with such a dread peril menacing her, she could not help giving way for the time being.

With uncovered head Luther Larrimer stood by, waiting and watching. He truly sympathized with the maiden, but he knew that words, however well they were meant, could do naught to help her, just then. It was truer kindness to maintain silence.

Blinky Rivers came near enough to take in this scene, then beat a slouching retreat, an ugly sneer bristling his coarse beard. Little danger of a counterplot there!

"An' that dug-gun feller lookin' wuss'n a preacher!" he muttered, spitting over one shoulder in huge disgust. "All right! Let 'em went! Mebbe tha'r prayin'll make it a easier trip over the range!"

As quickly as possible Zelda choked back her strong emotions, then whispered, just loud enough for Larrimer to catch:

"I have heard of a wicked plot, Mr. Larrimer, and you must know. If Rivers, or any of the men come this way, let me know, please."

"We are alone, Miss Pasadena. I'll keep watch," quietly said the Lad of Luck, believing this was but a vagary of an unsettled mind, at first; but his opinion quickly changed as Zelda hurriedly but accurately detailed the discovery so pluckily made by Ben Harris.

"You can trust him, sir," she added. "He is true and honest. He would give his life rather than see harm befall poor me!"

"Can you place the same amount of trust in me—in us?" asked Larrimer, earnestly. "If we swear to save you from those rascals, will you trust us enough to obey orders when the time comes?"

"Trust you?" lifting her face, a bright light leaping into her eyes. "As I would trust no other being now on earth! As I would trust my father if he—oh, father! why did you leave your poor child!"

"Then we will save you, Miss Pasadena," softly added Light-heart Lute. "When you feel stronger, go back to your tent. We mustn't waken any suspicions. I'll have a talk with my friend, and let you know the course we decide upon. Will that do?"

"I leave everything to you, sir," was the husky response.

Light-heart Lute took his time about imparting the information to his chum, lounging about the camp until he drove away such doubts as Blinky Rivers might have conjured up through that visit to the grave.

In good time, however, he joined Poley Applejohn in a smoke, lying on a little knoll where it

would be impossible for a spy to steal near enough to catch their words without being discovered.

The big fellow listened to the exposition of that diabolical plot without the change of a muscle, and one watching them—as at least one of the gang did constantly—could never have suspected how important a subject was being broached.

"Waal, I reckoned somethin' o' the sort would turn up," quietly said the big fellow, his half-closed eyes keeping keen watch on the ground back of his mate, trusting the other quarter to Larrimer's guardianship. "We're only two, by count, but we kin clean 'em out an' never strain a button!"

"You mean by fighting, Poley?"

"Sure! An' the dug-gun imps won't be in it from the fu't jump!"

"That won't do," decisively objected Larrimer. "We could get away with the gang, of course, if it came to that, but—there must be no fighting, for her sake!"

Applejohn shifted his position so that he could look squarely into the eyes of his chum, then slowly grunted forth:

"You're stuck on the gal, pardner?"

Light-heart Lute flushed hotly, but met that gaze without flinching.

"No, Poley. My late was settled before I met Miss Pasadena, but—she is a woman! Then, too, there's the mystery of my father's fate! I firmly believe that will be solved for all time, if only I can get hold of the notebook once owned by Cranky Jordan!"

"An' you reckon the gal's got the book?"

"Her father had. Rivers failed to find it, so—who else can possibly have possession?"

"Waal, what's the matter with a critter o' my bigness, lad?" chuckled the giant, then briefly detailing how he had found the notebook.

"And you kept this secret from me, Poley!" ejaculated Larrimer.

"So you wouldn't hev to do any lyin' of axed, lad. Then, too, I hed a bet with my own self to settle, an' I reckoned that same book'd do the business, an' it hes, too!" with a quiet triumph in his guarded tones.

"What do you mean, Poley?"

"That I've read the most 'portant part o' the book, an' I've found out the way to git inside o' that dug-gun gold crater, too!"

"What! you surely don't—"

"I shorely do, lad. But don't fergit that we're bein' watched, even ef we can't see the ugly mugs. Now—I've got the book, an' I know whar the crater lays. What's to hinder our goin' right thar, now?"

"This gang of devils, of course!"

"We kin let 'em pick a row, ef you won't act wise an' git in the fu't lick. Then we kin go to the crater; the way in hain't more'n a good quarter from whar we found the grizzly, lad!"

"All the more reason why we avoid a fight, then!" decided Larrimer. "We'll slip away quietly, and leave 'em a false trail to puzzle out. Then they'll never dream of the crater being so close at hand. See?"

The giant looked anything but satisfied, but he was used to giving way when their ideas came at odds, and so it was on this occasion.

Their talk lasted some time longer, but Light-heart Lute did all the planning for them both.

He would contrive to gain a word with Ben Harris, and likewise prepare Zelda for their flight. After that, they must take events as they came.

The very fact that their fate was considered settled by Blinky Rivers and his evil mates, rendered it all the easier for Light-heart Lute to make his arrangements. So long as no attempt was made at leaving camp, no harm could be done, Rivers reasoned.

Larrimer had a brief talk with the camp-cook, coming to an amicable understanding almost under the nose of Blinky Rivers, then he sauntered back to the tent, in front of which Zelda had been sitting, until his covert signal sent her inside the shelter.

Pausing in front of the opening, thus rendering it impossible for any spy to approach dangerously near, Light-heart Lute quietly spoke of the decision reached by himself and partner.

"If worst comes to worst, and Harris fails to turn the trick, Miss Pasadena, we can master those rascals. I don't want it to come to a fight, for your sake; but if it must—well, no harm shall come to you while one of us three can lift a hand."

"I know—I believe it, dear friend!"

"And you are willing to trust us, blindly, Miss Pasadena?"

"Trust you, sir? With my life—my very soul!"

Not a little startled by that impulsive outburst,

Larrimer turned away, more troubled in mind than he had been before, by far.

The afternoon wore on without further event of note, and the evening meal was spread, Zelda and the two chums eating apart from the men. And when Ben Harris brought their coffee, he whispered softly:

"Drink freely, and let them see it. Don't fear—I changed the pots, and they'll swallow the doctored stuff!"

CHAPTER XIII.

EXPLORING THE TUNNEL.

THE two chums interchanged quick glances as Ben Harris shuffled away, to complete his tour of duty by waiting upon Blinky Rivers and his mates.

Their eyes contained the same doubt; what if, the more surely to entrap them, this fellow was pretending to be a friend? What if, after all, he was the real agent made use of by that one-eyed rascal?

"Pears like I done lost my taste fer coffee!" grimly muttered the giant, after a brief spell of silence. "Ef they hain't a bug in it, then I'm pritty nigh shore Ben Harris used his old sock fer to do the strainin' of it—I jest be, now!"

"Too late for growin' qualmish, old man," lightly laughed the Lad of Luck, as he poured out a supply of coffee for each. "If you can manage it without showing too much doubt, just sling a look over yon' way. They're watching us too mighty close for shamming, on our part, Poley!"

"And you can trust the cook, senores," guardedly chimed in Zelda, cooling her coffee a bit with her breath, then drinking a few swallows. "There can be no danger since he bade us drink."

Applejohn was silenced, if not entirely convinced by this act of perfect faith. If he could have had his own way, there would have been no call for all this dangerous simulation, this groping in the dark.

"They knew that their death had been decided upon. They knew their enemies, and their dastardly scheme. Then, why not remove both enemy and peril at one good, honest stroke?"

If there had lingered any doubt as to the truthfulness of the camp-cook in reporting the plans of Blinky Rivers and his mates, all would have been dissipated by watching the covert manner in which those rascals noted each movement made by the trio at the tent. And while leisurely drinking his coffee, Light-heart Lute saw Rivers give his nearest chums an exultant nudge, grinning all over his face.

The meal ended, Zelda withdrew inside her tent, shortly after closing the flap that served as a door. And, though ignorant of the drug made use of by the one-eyed rascal, and of course ignorant of the precise manner in which it was expected to begin its work, both Larrimer and Applejohn seemed dull, stupid, sleepy, when Blinky Rivers drew near to tell them what arrangements he had made for guarding the camp, that evening.

He, himself, yawned more than once, but was too dull to take alarm at this unusually early desire for sleep; and chuckling in covert glee at the promised success of his evil plans, he left the two chums and in less than half an hour was snoring heavily under a stunted bush.

Possibly the drugged coffee had something to do with it, but not one of the gang seemed to suspect anything out of the way, even when one caught sight of another actually falling into a heavy slumber while in the act of lighting his pipe.

The two chums counterfeited sleep, lying not far from the tent in which Zelda Pasadena lay concealed; but with all their seeming carelessness, every sense was on the alert, and at the first sign of coming danger, their mask would drop.

By the sinking glow of the camp-fire, they saw Ben Harris pass from one to another of the stupefied ruffians, bending over to shake each man harshly, as though trying to awaken them to a sense of peril. In each case he failed, and there rung an almost fierce triumph in his tones as he drew nearer the mates, saying:

"Haven't I made my word good, strangers? Could even a man-mountain serve a lady better than I've served mine?"

"Pass on—don't talk!" muttered Larrimer, without stirring a limb. "We're taking no chances. Some of 'em may be playing possum. Go—wait back of the tent."

It was this unusual degree of prudence that led Light-heart Lute to veto the giant's suggestion of disarming the drugged ruffians. To do so would take time, and there was a possibility

of rousing one or more of the gang who might have swallowed but little of the coffee.

"With only men, it'd be all right," he muttered, in conclusion. "But when we've got a lady along, it makes a terrible sight of difference, old man. This isn't the sort of war-path you're used to, but you've got to make the best of it."

Poley submitted, in all meekness. He was accustomed to giving the Lad of Luck full swing, and while he doubted the wisdom of leaving an armed enemy in their rear, he never once thought of making a fight over it.

The fugitives left camp without meeting any check, passing by the little herd of horses and mules without appropriating any of them. To flee on four legs instead of two, would seem the most natural, until their surroundings were taken into consideration. Both Harris and Zelda had taken it for granted that animals would be used, until Light-heart Lute explained his plans.

"Then, too, if we fled on horseback, they could pick up our trail and overtake us, on foot, before we could get out of the hills. There's only one pass through which we could take the horses, and yet reach home. They could cut across on foot, and easily intercept us. So—we'll leave the knaves as little sign as we can."

While heading as though intent only on lessening the distance between camp and Happy Valley as quickly as possible, and taking pains to leave a clear trail rather than otherwise, at first, the little party veered to the south, so as to strike the little river barely a mile from camp.

"They can trail us this far, with daylight to guide 'em," laughed Light-heart Lute, when the water was reached. "And they can see that we're heading homeward, without going much out of our way in trying to blind our trail. They'll look for us down-stream, and by good rights we ought to give them one or two encouraging hints below this. See?"

Light-heart Lute was having it all his own way, now. Poley was crushed. Zelda would almost as soon have doubted the ghost of her dead father. Ben Harris had eyes, thoughts, feelings alone for this maiden whom he loved so madly.

Only one accident occurred while that false trail was being laid. Light-heart Lute slipped on a damp rock as they made their difficult way along the edge of the river, and before he could recover himself, had fallen into the water. Though there was a rapid current here, and the waters made a noisy fight with the rocks, both visible and unseen, there was no real danger, and Larrimer was the first to laugh at his own clumsiness. Until—

"I've lost it, Poley!" he exclaimed, his damp hand coming empty out of his bosom. "Quick! look for it! before it soaks and sinks!"

But their searching was all in vain, though nearly an hour was lost in hunting for the green-covered notebook, which had so recently come into the hands of the one for whom its contents meant so much!

Light-heart Lute seemed half beside himself at the loss, until the big fellow whispered in his ear:

"I kin lead ye plum' straight to the gittin' in way, lad, an' I kin 'peat over pritty nigh all thar was writ' 'bout Stephen Larrimer, too!"

"Well, it might have been worse!" sighed the Lad of Luck, giving over the vain quest. "Those rascals will never get hold of the clew, at any rate!"

If he had only known the truth! If he could only catch a glimpse of what lay right where the two chums had counterfeited sleep, after their supper!

The false trail was completed, as far as they thought best to consume time in laying it, and then, carefully selecting the most favorable point, the fugitives turned away from the river, never once resting foot on earth, soft or hard, until far away from the stream down which their enemies would surely pass in hot pursuit.

When once fairly beyond the limits of danger from that quarter, Light-heart Lute resigned the lead to Applejohn, who promptly faced about to reach the crater of gold, as he firmly believed the precipitous hill-top near which Miguel Pasadena had met his fate, would prove.

It was a toilsome journey, and consumed no little time, but the men were tough, and even Zelda, thanks to her native health and out-door life seemed really tireless. Instead of impeding, she actually urged them on to greater speed.

Notwithstanding all this, day was dawning before the little party of fugitives drew near to the point where Poley Applejohn had fixed the

entrance to the fabled crater of gold, and which he had been on the point of exploring at the moment when those yells and shots drew them away to the saving of Zelda Pasadena.

"I wouldn't wonder ef 'twas right out o' thar the b'ar come," the big fellow muttered, to Larrimer, looking to his Winchester. "I'll mog on ahead a bit, while you look to the gal."

But Light-heart Lute would not have it that way. He bade Harris keep close beside Miss Pasadena, then pressed on alongside the giant.

They gained the mouth of what seemed to be a shallow cave, after quite a scramble, but not a sound came from the darkness beyond. There seemed naught to fear, and calling Harris to bring Zelda on, the two chums prepared for a thorough exploration of the tunnel, if tunnel it should prove to be.

"As it shorley will," nodded Applejohn, striking a match with which to light their pocket-lanterns. "Cranky Jordan set it all down into that book o' his'n. He said it 'peared like 'twas made out o' cooled laver, an' what's the matter with this?" giving the smooth, hard rock a kick with his boot.

Larrimer made no reply, but his face was paler, his eyes seemed larger than ordinary by the yellow light cast forth by their lanterns.

He had not had time to closely question Applejohn concerning the contents of that notebook, partly because he had expected to read for himself, partly because it called for all his leisure to plan their escape from camp.

What was it lying before them? Was his life-trail to end there? Was he to find his father's bones? For, surely, there could be no possibility of his still living!

Now that the end seemed so near at hand, the Lad of Luck apparently began to lose his nerve, and it was Poley Applejohn who gave Harris his instructions, bidding the camp-cook keep an eye outside during their absence, and to guard against either needlessly exposing themselves.

Unable to wait even for this, Larrimer passed further into the tunnel, casting the light of his lantern ahead, the yellow rays glancing from the smooth, almost glassy walls. And by the time Poley rejoined him, Larrimer was convinced that, who could say how many ages ago? that curious opening had been filled with glowing lava, escaping from a living volcano.

There was little to delay the chums. The tunnel showed few crooks in its length, and only an occasional side-shoot, little more than irregular chambers. Its general course was downward, at a gradual slope, though with now and then a hollow and a little hill, as more or less resistance had met that flood of molten matter.

Hardly knowing what they expected to discover, yet feeling certain that a revelation of some sort awaited their coming, the two chums pressed on in silence. Only one remark had been made since their exploration began, and that was by Applejohn; he called attention to the steady if not strong draught flowing in the same direction they were following.

"That shows 'tain't a blind alley, anyway, pard! But—how much funder on kin the durned openin' be, ye reckon?"

Larrimer made no reply, simply pressing ahead at greater speed. It had not been found, as yet, but before many more minutes Larrimer cried:

"Look, Poley! Isn't that a crack of daylight, yonder?"

Before the giant could reply, an ominous sound came rolling through the tunnel, plainly coming from the entrance where they had left Zelda and Ben Harris. A sound that could not be mistaken by those practiced ears, changed though the echoes were by being so confined.

The rapid reports of firearms!

"Powder burnin'!" cried the giant, wheeling about. "Them devils hev smelt out the trick, by glory!"

"Back, for life!" cried Larrimer, leaping swiftly to the rescue.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MARVELOUS DISCOVERY.

POLEY APPLEJOHN was close upon his heels, but long as were the legs of the giant, he could not overtake the Lad of Luck, although he ran as he had seldom been called upon to run before.

It was well that their lights were protected by glass, or that swift rush must have left them in utter darkness. It was well that both men were more than commonly sure of foot, else one or both must have come to grief on one or another of those spaces of glassy smoothness. For, with those ominous sounds still ringing in their ears, with the knowledge that a woman was in peril of worse than death, with but a lad to protect

her from those merciless demons, there was no time to be lost in cautious advance.

Even at the best, could they get back in time? Would Ben Harris, even though he should sacrifice his own life to save the maiden whom he loved so hopelessly, be able to beat back those devils, long enough for help to reach them?

For neither of the two chums for an instant doubted what caused those shots: despite the false trail they had laid, they knew that Blinky Rivers and his hardly less vicious mates were trying to regain what their over-confidence had lost them the night last past.

"Hold on—you've got to hold out, Ben Harris!" fiercely cried Light-heart Lute as he sped onward, noting how suddenly that rapid firing had slackened.

Poley Applejohn said naught, though the same fear was assailing him. He had no breath to spare, if he was to do any fighting at the end of that mad race against time.

A hoarse shout came from in front, as though the gang was exulting in their triumph; but the next instant there came another rapid rattle of pistol-shots, and as Light-heart Lute leaped into the light of day once more, he saw Zelda Pasadena, wrapped in a blue cloud of her own making, standing at the opening, bravely defending the tunnel, while Ben Harris, bleeding freely, was recharging his revolvers.

"At 'em, Poley!" shouted the Lad of Luck, leaping past the maiden, at the same time swinging her back out of range. "Give 'em a full meal, since they're so hungry!"

His foot slipped as he cleared that little cloud of smoke, but as he went down on that glassy surface, his pistol spoke viciously, and with a hideous screech of mortal agony, Blinky Rivers leaped into the air, turning backward as he fell, dead ere his body struck the lava lumps below!

Poley Applejohn came charging past his fallen chum, roaring like an enraged grizzly as he sought to check his rush, for his first and most natural thought was that Light-heart Lute had been shot.

Only for this, there would have been no survivors among the evil gang, for two of their number had fallen before the chums came up, and the big fellow was as sure of aim as he was of foot.

That fall came near stunning Larrimer, and by the time he regained breath enough to urge Applejohn to press the pursuit, the three ruffians had vanished among the brush and rocks.

Zelda, too, was confusing him with her sobs and cries of mingled grief and fear. She, like the big fellow, laid that fall to a shot, and by the time Light-heart Lute could assure them to the contrary, that he was sound as ever, any attempt at pursuit would have been worse than useless.

"'Twas a mistake to let any of 'em get away, since they opened the racket," he said, banishing a frown as best he could. "But they've had time, by this, to think of striking back if pressed, and we can't any of us afford to risk a shot from under cover. So—let 'em go!"

Zelda was untouched by the lead which the rascals had poured into the mouth of the tunnel, and while Ben Harris had received three separate wounds, neither one proved to be serious, or even bad enough to put him on the retired list.

"He saved my life, though!" said Zelda, turning to warmly press the young man's hand, her dark eyes thanking him even better than her lips. "He wouldn't let me have a shot, as long as his loads held out. He even exposed himself more than was needed, just to draw their fire. Don't deny it, sir! You know you did!"

"I wanted to keep you from harm," muttered Harris, flushing deeply. "What did it matter if I—don't say any more—I can't bear it!"

Now that the strain was over, the young man staggered and would have fallen, only for the ready support lent him by Light-heart Lute.

"I'll look to his hurts. You take a look at the carrion down yonder, pard!" said Larrimer, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Applejohn obeyed, but after pausing merely long enough to make sure the three ruffians were beyond the power of doing further harm, he kept on and made a careful scout through the vicinity, until fairly assured that the surviving knaves had really left the neighborhood.

"Mebbe they'll pluck up 'nough fer to come back, but 'twon't be this day, nur yit 'thout fetchin' a heap sight bigger gang fer to buck ag'in' our crowd!" he grimly chuckled, as he retraced his steps to the spot where the dead men were lying.

With no further thought than that it might come handy to have an extra supply of firearms, Poley Applejohn fell to examining the bodies.

But when he came to look more closely at what remained of Blinky Rivers, he met an astounding surprise.

As he turned the body over, a green-covered notebook fell out of his breast, and as it lay on the ground, the giant saw where two great claws had made holes through both covers.

It was indeed the book over the loss of which Light-heart Lute had mourned, because of his long-missing father. And as he picked it up, Poley gave a shrewd guess at the truth: it had been lost in camp, not in the river, and from its contents Blinky Rivers had found his guide to the crater of gold!

Only waiting long enough to carry those grim reminders of the fight out of sight from the tunnel, Applejohn returned to his friends, making known his discovery, turning the notebook over to Larrimer, as the one most deeply interested in its contents.

"You kin 'splain that all to her," with a sidelong toward Zelda, he added. "You kin keep a lookout at the same time, I reckon. Fer me—waal, I'm gwine to take a walk, jest to see what sort o' back yard we've got!"

"You think this leads to the gold crater?" ventured Zelda, glancing quickly from face to face. "If so, do not fear to speak out before me. I know that book once belonged to my father, but I resign all claims upon it. It led to his—'Tis yours, sir, if you will accept it," she added, turning to Light-heart Lute.

Briefly as possible Larrimer explained what he hoped to ascertain through the agency of that notebook, but he was cut short by Zelda, her dark eyes opening widely as she exclaimed:

"Why didn't I remember? Your name is Larrimer? And—Jordan has much to say about his partner, whose name was Larrimer—Stephen Larrimer!"

"I believe he was my father, Miss Pasadena," gravely said Lute. "Wait a bit, pard," turning to Applejohn. "You don't reckon there's any danger of those three fellows coming back?"

"Not unless they run up ag'in a army o' tha'r own breed, lad."

"You're not too badly hurt to walk a little ways, Harris?"

"I'm nearly as sound as ever, sir," was the prompt reply.

"And you, Miss Zelda? Will you help us complete our exploration?"

"If you ask it, most assuredly!"

"Then we'll all make the trip together, Poley," decided Larrimer, looking to his lantern. "There appeared to be an opening of some sort, but I couldn't make out whether it was anything more than the crack it seemed just then. Now—we'll settle it, once for all!"

The trip was quickly made, but another check came just before the party reached the point where the two chums had been checked before. A faint, uncertain sound came from ahead, and drawing their pistols, the pards pressed on in advance, shortly after coming to a halt before a huge rock which barred their further progress.

At one side of this rocky barrier there was a crevice, through which showed the pure light of day, and as Light-heart Lute pressed his face close to this, a low ejaculation of amazement broke from his lips.

He seemed to be peering forth upon a natural paradise, so green, so fertile everything appeared, as far as his limited range of vision ran.

"Waal, that's the greenest crater, fer a crater, I ever *did* see!" the big fellow ejaculated, drawing back after a brief look. "An' ef this hyar rock—what's the matter, Zeldy?" he asked, as the maiden, who had taken his place at the crevice, gave a low cry of surprise.

"There's a—is it human?"

Whether or no, what followed sounded marvelously like a human voice:

Oh-h-h, ho! H-e-l-p! Men or devils, c-o-m-e h-e-l-p m-e o-u-t!

Swiftly, almost fiercely, Light-heart Lute drew Zelda away from the crevice, pressing his own face there until the rough rock bruised his cheek, his heart thumping until it almost made itself audible to the others, only less startled than himself.

He caught sight of a form shrouded in skins of hares and birds, eked out with a rude cape of plaited grass. He could see a mass of white hair, long and tangled, almost hiding its owner's face. So much seemed human, but the body, the legs, the arms! The one was bowed, bent almost double. The others were crooked, distorted, bearing only a remote resemblance to those of humanity!

So, at least, it seemed at that first glance.

His first thought had been that fate had at last brought him to his long-missing parent, but now—it could not be!

"Who are you that calls?" he forced himself to shout, through the crevice, just as that deformed figure passed out of his range of vision.

"What is your name?"

A hoarse, wild, piteous scream almost drowned his last query, and then the deformed being came closer to the rock, begging for help, for aid to escape from that fearful prison!

"Devil or mortal, don't abandon me!" he wailed, beating the insensate rock with his hand—only with one, for the other arm dangled by his side, seemingly crippled. "Save me! Speak again! Speak, if only to utter curses! It's been so long since I've heard any human voice but my own, that—oh, pray speak! speak! speak to me!"

"Who are you?" quavered Larrimer, once again. "What is your name?"

"Oh, thanks! If you only knew—keep on speaking! Shout—cry out, loud! Make me realize that it is a human—you are a man? This is not all a dream? I've had them so often! I can't—do speak, I beg of you! Keep on speaking until—just once more, for love of God!"

"I hear you, and I'll set you free, if it can be done. Is there no way of getting in there? Can't you climb out, anywhere?"

"No—I've tried for years—ages—ever since this pitiless rock fell over to bar me in! I've tried to undermine it, but—have you gone? Call out—don't let me talk—you talk, dear angel!"

"Plum' crazy!" muttered Applejohn, yet taking note of what the unknown said about undermining that rocky barrier. "Ef we could push this—*Git away, you!*" his voice lifting to a roar, as he felt that huge mass—did it tremble under his heavy push!

"Don't drive me away!" almost shrieked the unknown, but when Light-heart Luke explained what his chum meant, the deformed reluctantly moved back and to one side.

"I b'lieve it *kin* be done, ef we all j'ine in right piert!" declared the giant, gathering a long breath for the attempt. "When I say—git ready—bu'st yer buttons! *Now!*"

Slowly but surely that huge mass began to yield, then gave way with a rush, toppling over into a hollow below, and Light-heart Lute was the first to spring across the fallen mass.

"Who are you?" he cried, as the deformed sunk on his knees before the opening, one hand lifted as in prayer. "Is your name Stephen Larrimer?"

"Who calls—who remembers my name?" gasped the poor fellow, reeling as he regained his feet. "Who are you, that you—"

"Your son, if your name is Stephen Larrimer—*my father!*"

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF THE LIFE-TRAIL.

WITH never the ghost of a doubt remaining, Luther Larrimer uttered those words, gave this poor deformed that title, reaching out his hands to bestow the embrace he had so often dreamed of giving since his long, eventful life-trail began.

The deformed shrunk back, bewildered, scared, trembling like a leaf. His crippled leg failed him, and he would have fallen, only for those strong arms which gathered his scarred form to a manly breast.

"Father—at last! If mother could only have lived to see—"

A choking cry broke from the deformed's lips, and then he hung a nerveless weight across the arms of—his son!

"Thar's a bit whisky left, pard!" cried Poley Applejohn, thrusting the flask containing it into Lute's hand as the younger man gently lowered that piteously scarred form upon the grass. "An' thar ought to be water—yender's a pond, by glory!"

He caught the senseless man up in his strong arms, bearing him swiftly across the gently sloping surface to the edge of the pond, out of which a few ducks rose on rapid wing at his approach. And then, with the others looking on, the two chums were not long in restoring the fainting man to his senses.

He acted more naturally, now, though still like one who, after many long years of solitary confinement—an imprisonment which he has come to believe must last until death calls—finds his prison doors flung open and himself rudely thrust out into the blinding glare of day. He knew not how to receive his freedom!

Little by little the poor fellow began to rally, and seeing how each additional face added to his excitement, Zelda drew Poley and Ben Harris aside, under pretense of examining the basin which had for so many years been the prison-house of this poor mortal.

There was much of interest for their inspection, but Applejohn paused longest in front of where the huge rock had fallen from before the lava-tube. And his face wore a look little short of awe as he picked up one of the rude tools with which Stephen Larrimer had labored; a stone of flint, with handle of twisted withes!

"An' him with but one hand an' arm, ye mind! An' look what-all he's done!" as he measured with his eye the space hollowed out in front of where the huge rock had stood. "*Jest pounded out, ye mind!*"

Hours were spent in looking around that fertile basin, among the products of which were Indian corn, wheat and wild rice, the last edging the little pond occupying the center of the crater—if crater the walled-in basin had been in past ages.

"Whar'd he git the fu'st start?" wondered Applejohn, the marvel increasing with each fresh discovery. "A body'd nat'ally look fer heap o' smartness, bein' as he's kin to the lad, but—it don't look like *even a Larrimer* could 'a' 'vented corn, an' wheat, an'—but a man as could hammer out sech a holler in the solid rock—jest makin' powder out of it, mind ye! An' him with no better'n one hand, an' jest a stone fer to do it with! Waal, ef a body was to say sech a man hed 'vented a hull angel out o' jest a piller-tick an' its feathers, I'd shet my two eyes an' swaller it down! Fer I'd jest *have* to!"

Little by little Lute brought the deformed around, gradually calming his dangerous excitement, deftly leading his dazed memory backward, until Stephen Larrimer—for he now avowed his identity—gave a brief account of how he had been shut up in that natural prison.

There was much truth in those wild ravings set down by "Cranky Jordan." They had been partners, and while exploring this as yet unmapped region, they discovered the old crater, entering it through the lava-tube, and there discovered gold in plenty.

Then they were attacked by two great grizzly bears, while they were in a lava-chamber nearly midway of the tunnel. Jordan fled in one direction with a grizzly in chase, while Larrimer made his way back to the basin, being overtaken by the second monster just as he sprung out into daylight.

He must have turned and fought the monster, for when his senses returned, he noted the decaying carcass of the beast. But his right arm and right leg were frightfully injured, their bones seemingly ground to atoms.

How he lived through that time, Larrimer never knew. It had been summer when the bears came. It was winter when he fairly realized that he was still living! His terrible wounds had healed, but his right side was entirely crippled.

Then it was that he found the tunnel barred. How the mighty rock had been shaken down, he never knew. And when he realized that he was imprisoned without a hope of escape unless some assistance should come to him from the outer world, his brain must have turned, again!

What he lived upon, during all those months of sickness, of madness, was another mystery which he had never attempted to solve. True, as he realized later, there was a great store of hares in the crater, and at times an abundance of wild-fowl. Doubtless both of these contributed to his wants.

There is neither time nor space to give, even in brief, the history of those long years, as gathered by the younger Larrimer. Enough that it was one unended longing for liberty, unbroken fighting against terrible odds by an almost helpless cripple.

From the gizzard of a mallard duck, Larrimer took three grains of corn which sprouted, and from which he was to in time supply his needs for bread-stuff. In another he found wheat kernels, and now he had an abundance of both, as could be seen by glancing around.

Then he told of his efforts to leave the crater, the glass-like walls of which were too nearly perpendicular for scaling; too high for aught to pass over without wings. There was only one possible avenue, and that was barred by the mighty rock!

He told how, after uncounted days of shouting through that crevice, which he had contrived to form, but which defied further enlargement, madly hoping for the return of his partner with aid, he had labored for months and years with all the hours he could spare from sleep and winning his food, trying to undermine that mighty boulder. Even with tools of tempered steel it would have been a discouraging task. And he had naught but stone hammers, laboriously formed, and but one hand and arm with which to wield them!

Gathering these hints of a soul-numbing life, consumed much time, and the day was nearly spent before Stephen Larrimer progressed this far! It was beginning to grow dusk in the crater, and Lute was just remembering his friends, when he was startled to his feet by a loud, fierce roar, coming from near the tunnel.

"Another bear!" cried the deformed, shrinking away.

"Poley—in trouble!" cried the Lad of Luck. And the younger man was right. That mighty roar came from the lungs of the giant, and quickly following, came the vicious crackling of pistols and rifles.

And as Light-heart Lute sprang forward, he caught sight of his chum plunging into the very middle of a small crowd, the items forming which went flying in every direction before those swiftly moving arms, that irresistible bulk.

"Here's with ye, pard!" yelled Larrimer, charging with pistols in hand, dropping one of those reeling shapes. "Room, ye devils! Room for the Lad of Luck!"

Even as that familiar slogan was uttered, Larrimer jerked up his pistol, wasting a bullet which was on the point of being sent straight into the brain of one of those invaders: for he recognized in his target a woman—and that woman none other than Roxy Ringgold!

"Stand fast, men!" cried the amazon, her revolver sending bullet after bullet at that swiftly coming figure. "Strike hard—strike sure! Kill—for the crater of gold!"

Light-heart Lute caught the sound of another feminine voice before he plunged into the thick of that melee: the voice of Zelda Passadena. He had no time to answer, or even to cast a glance in that direction, for he knew right well that both Zelda and Harris were coming to lend a hand against that evil gang.

"Down you go, Dan Humphrey!" he cried, recognizing one of Blinky Rivers's mates just as he sent a bullet through his brain.

For a brief space it was a seemingly aimless struggle; then the mass separated a little wider, and once again Light-heart Lute recognized a familiar face. Then—he and Showy Joe Hoover came together in what each man knew must end in the death of one or both.

The scrape of a bullet across his knuckles caused Larrimer to drop his pistol just as the tall gambler closed with him, and he had no time to draw a knife; it was all he could do to keep that vicious blade from his own heart, those strong fingers from closing about his throat. And, as every nerve was straining for the fall, Light-heart Lute caught sight of Roxy Ringgold aiming a pistol direct for his brain, not twenty feet away!

In such times men think swiftly, and Larrimer swung around, forcing Hoover into his place, just as that weapon cracked.

CHAPTER XVI.

BACK TO THE OLD HOME.

BOTH men fell, but Lute Larrimer rose, alone, leaving Showy Joe Hoover lying on his back, blood and brains oozing through that little hole between the eyes.

The Lad of Luck drew back an arm to strike Roxy Ringgold, but before his blow could fall, the woman realized what she had done, and flinging up her arms, giving a frightful scream, she fell like one stricken by lightning.

There was little more to do. Even before the fall of their leaders, those hired ruffians had gotten their fill, and such of them as were able, had turned to flight, through the dark tunnel. The giant was in pursuit, his angry roar seemingly doubled in volume by those contracted quarters.

Light-heart Lute followed, forgetting all others in his brotherly love for the big fellow. More than once he met with a still or writhing body, but none of them was that of his chum, and Poley was found at the foot of the slope beyond the mouth of the tunnel, fiercely mocking at the few survivors of that evasion, now in headlong flight on horseback.

The big fellow was bleeding from half a dozen wounds, but he laughed at the expressed fears of his partner, saying, in panting tones:

"Jest barked, lad! Reckon sech dug-gun runs could git into my meat-house! Jest scratches, an'— But you boy! You're hurt!"

Only a graze or two, of which Larrimer had been unconscious until his attention was called to them. And then, remembering his father and their other friends, he urged Poley to return to the crater with him.

They met Zelda and Harris coming toward them, a short distance from the exit crater, and after assuring her that no serious injury had been received by either, Light-heart Lute asked:

"And my father? He is not—he is safe?"

"Please heaven—yes!" replied Zelda, her hand in his as they hastened back toward the crater. "But—that woman—"

"Roxy Ringgold! What of her?"

"Dead!" and something in her tone caused Light-heart Lute to drop her hand.

"You didn't—how did it happen?"

"No, I didn't kill her, though I wanted to, when I saw how she tried to murder you! I saw it all. I had emptied my pistol, and before I could reload, you saved yourself. Then—I saw her crawl over to where that dead man lay—saw her kiss the wound between his eyes! And—I sprang forward to catch her hand, but—I was too late!"

Zelda said no more, and Lute asked no more questions. The exit was close at hand, and just beyond it he knew the truth was waiting him.

By the side of Showy Joe Hoover lay his wife, one arm about his neck, her lips stained with the blood from that final kiss, and between her eyes, as between his, one could see the ugly death-mark!

One of the men originally hired by Miguel Passadena, Fred Ott by name, was found among the four badly wounded ruffians. And from his lips, before death closed them for all time, came the explanation of that unexpected invasion.

Roxy Ringgold and Showy Joe Hoover had acted promptly on the hint given them by Tiger McAllister, and gathering a force of reckless fellows, they took the trail left by Passadena and his train, following it with some difficulty, but making good enough time to be in the neighborhood when that first fight, with Blinky Rivers and his gang, took place.

As stated, three men got away with their lives, and fate brought them into contact with that second force of rascals. Recognizing several of the party, they quickly told their story, and volunteered to guide them to the tunnel, which they felt sure led to the crater of gold.

They did so, and only for that timely discovery by Poley Applejohn, before the entire party could enter the crater, success would almost certainly have been theirs.

Instead, they had met with defeat, and once again the right proved victorious.

The two chums dug a grave and buried husband and wife side by side. If there were no tears shed over their bodies, there were grave looks and almost saddened hearts. For, after all, one had been a woman, and her last action in life proved that she could love sincerely.

The other bodies were taken out of the crater, by way of the tunnel, and likewise hidden from sight.

Then, with a pistol fixed so that no one could enter by that passage without giving the alarm, our friends settled down to rest, before completing their arrangements for the homeward journey.

All this called for time and thought, for, now that he had recovered from that joyous shock, Stephen Larrimer proved that the crater of gold was not all a fable, for he showed his friends a vast quantity of gold, in dust, grains, nuggets of varying size, all of which he had collected during those long, weary years, besides his other labors.

"An' him a clean cripple!" muttered Poley Applejohn, in little short of actual awe.

The horses and mules once owned by Passadena were secured, and Ben Harris acted as a herd-lad during the days which followed. Days of sore trouble for him, too, since he knew that Zelda, whom he loved so madly, loved Light-heart Lute. In that, too, he must prove himself the "Lad of Luck!" as poor Ben gloomily reflected.

There was much more of great interest concerning those long years of hopeless hoping, which Stephen Larrimer had to explain; but enough has been said to enable the reader to fill out the sketch.

A fortnight was spent in recruiting, and in arranging for their homeward trip. The wounded chums were sound as ever at the end of that time, and Stephen Larrimer seemed to renew his youth as he heard his son talk of their old home. If only the wife and mother might be there to greet them! And yet—Stephen Larrimer sighed softly as he looked at his crippled limbs and felt of his scarred face. After all, it might be for the best. She would remember him as last he stood before her. Better so!

The gold was packed upon the mules, and after blocking up the entrance to the tunnel, the little cavalcade began their journey, heading first for Happy Valley. Nothing but natural

difficulties barred their way, and the village was reached in safety.

Once there, Light-heart Lute, who could no longer ignore the fact that Zelda Passadena loved him, called Little Chiquita to his aid, and through her Zelda learned the truth—that Luther Larrimer loved and hoped to marry Grace Elton.

Little Chiquita did her duty admirably. Neither she nor Zelda outwardly showed emotion, or seemed to know that a tender heart was being sorely tried. Then—Zelda called up her Indian stoicism, and fought the fight out in silence.

After all, she was not seriously hurt. If she had known Lute longer the cure might have been more difficult. And so—not long after Light-heart Lute married Grace, Zelda made Ben Harris just as happy after the same fashion!

With ample riches, even after sharing with Zelda and his chum, the Larrimers, father and son, bade adieu to the mountains, journeying back to the old home, there to settle down while Stephen Larrimer lived.

Adam Elton bore them company, of course, for he, like the others, had ample to live on, and was weary of life in the mining regions.

Stephen Larrimer had told his rescuers that he had gleaned the golden harvest pretty thoroughly, and so no attempt was made to hold the crater by those who had the best right to it. And when, after a period of prudent waiting, Tiger Trick McAllister took possession with his gang of rascals, they found but scanty reward for their labors.

And during their absence at the crater a forest fire swept down upon the valley and blotted out the Half-way House and its huts. The building was never replaced, and the Tiger's gang drifted away to other parts, greatly to the relief of the honest people living at Happy Valley.

THE END.

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